15. ‘A minister or a clerk?’:
Jim Fairbairn (II)

At last Jim Fairbairn was in a position to apply all he knew and believed about aviation. There was wide appreciation of the Minister's appointment, not least at Geelong Grammar where the boys were awarded a celebratory half-holiday on 6 May 1939 in honour of the chairman of the school council's attainment of Cabinet rank.1 A proud Geoffrey Fairbairn enjoyed universal gratitude at Corio, but his mother was not at home to share her husband's delight. In mid-March she had left for six months abroad, farewelled at a party for 400 guests. Peggy Fairbairn was now in England and, as one of Bob Menzies' British friends reported, she was 'in the seventh heaven' about Jim's elevation.2

---

1 G. A. Cameron (A/g Headmaster) to J. V. Fairbairn, 26 April 1939, copy, Geelong Grammar School Archives.

2 The Argus, 14 March 1939; J. P. L. Thomas to Menzies, 16 May 1940, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/539/5.
Fairbairn’s new Air Ministry would soon move into offices in the recently constructed Century Building at the corner of Swanston Street and Little Collins Street, opposite the Melbourne Town Hall. Blonde plywood panelling, flush jointed, with matching joinery, cushioned rubber-sheet flooring, terrazzo, and stainless steel were more suggestive of a passenger liner than flying machines. But it was a sparkling Art Deco structure reaching 14 vertically ribbed storeys to the sky. Melbourne’s first fully air-conditioned building, it was a symbolic contrast to the grim earth-clasping nineteenth-century bluestone of the Army’s Victoria Barracks, a brief tram ride away in St Kilda Road, where Geoff Street presided over the Defence ministry. The 100 or so officers of the Department of Civil Aviation central administration were also re-located from Victoria Barracks to two floors of Almora House, at the other end of Little Collins Street. Plans made by the former Defence minister, Vic Thorby, to shift Civil Aviation to a new building in Canberra had been shelved by Menzies amid Country Party remonstrances at the dominance of Victorian ministers in the Cabinet, and the alleged ‘evacuation’ of public servants from the capital to Melbourne. Air Vice Marshal Williams, by contrast, could hardly conceal his joy at the arrival of an informed and enthusiastic aviation minister and the departure of the uncommunicative Thorby, a builder who ‘paid particular attention to building plans to ensure that plumbing costs were kept to a minimum by having kitchens, bathrooms and toilets close to one another’.

The new minister was soon in the news. He was, it was reported, going to meet weekly with his senior staff. There was going to be ‘frank talk’. A cascade of policy announcements followed. He signalled his support for the introduction of night-flying services by Australian airlines. He recommended stop-gap measures to ensure stability of domestic airmail and passenger services pending new agreements and rationalisation. He announced that all aircraft operating on routes supplied with beam radio beacons would be equipped with receiving apparatus by the end of May. He pronounced that there was no limit to the amount of money that could be spent on aviation in Australia, without one penny being wasted. Rising temperatures at the Treasury were mildly subdued when he said that the three aerodromes needed in every capital city would not all have to be paid for by the government. He was also quickly on record attesting his pleasure at finding that:

the old idea that a pilot should be a reckless devil-may-care individual has passed — at any rate as far as the professional pilot is concerned — and that displays of fool-hardiness by the inexperienced are greeted with all the emphasis on the ‘fool’ and none on the ‘hardiness’...

---

4 Williams, These are Facts, p.229.
Not only must air transport be safe, but it must convince the public of its safety...and the subsidy requirements of existing lines are reduced by greater public patronage.

Belatedly displaying sensitivity to the cost of aviation to the public purse, Fairbairn took opportunities to underline the contribution made by the civil aviation industry to the nation’s defence preparedness.

Although he was only assisting the Defence Minister in relation to military aviation, Fairbairn’s knowledge and popular acceptance as an authority on all aviation matters were a political advantage to Geoff Street and the Prime Minister. As war came closer, it was he who issued a reassuring statement about the organisation of Australia’s reserve flying forces. In an emergency, he said, Australia could provide 373 highly trained pilots and 121 transport machines capable of carrying a force of 1000 men. Commercial pilots provided a reserve of skilled men for the RAAF, capable of making long-distance flights under any weather conditions. In what some might have thought an implicit admission of inadequate and vulnerable air capability, he described the reserve forces as a second line of defence in the air. In addition to these pilots, he said, aero clubs and other organisations had trained 2500 pilots, giving Australia an additional reserve of about 1500. With little expansion of present civil training facilities, he suggested, 1000 pilots a year could be trained ‘at a moderate expense to taxpayers’. Fortunately for the government these rather fanciful figures escaped serious criticism.5

Among the earliest tasks for the new Minister for Civil Aviation had been some delicate matters of personnel. None was of more concern to Fairbairn than the fate of Wing Commander A. H. Cobby. Writing about him to the Prime Minister, Fairbairn noted that ‘Cobby was the greatest single seater fighter pilot in the Australian Flying Corps during the War’ (No. 4 Squadron’s ‘most successful Hun-getter’ as the squadron history had put it in 1919).6 Unfortunately, in the reorganisation of the Civil Aviation Department, Harry Cobby’s position of Controller of Operations had become redundant. Cobby had retired from the RAAF to become a member of the Civil Aviation Board in the Department of Defence. The Board having been abolished with the creation of the department, he was neither a public servant nor an Air Force officer. ‘It is unthinkable that Wing Commander Cobby’s appointment should be terminated without some other position being found for him.’ Thus matters stood at the beginning of August 1939. Menzies referred the problem to the Defence Minister. A month

later, with war declared, an obvious solution presented itself. The famous Harry Cobby DSO DFC and two bars would be welcomed back into the RAAF. As it turned out this was not one of Geoff Street’s best decisions.  

The Dili Mission: ‘Fraternisation 22/7/39 J. V. Fairbairn’  
(Courtesy of Audrey Elford)

Shortly before he had taken up Cobby’s case, on 22 July 1939, Fairbairn had flown to Dili with his private secretary, Dick Elford, to explore the possibility of an air service between Portuguese Timor and Australia. The mission itself was productive in spite of Fairbairn having no facility in Portuguese and being unable to understand the Acting Governor’s French. Fairbairn’s English was equally unintelligible to his host. Negotiations were therefore carried out in both English (the Governor) and French, in which the Australian minister, like his friend Geoff Street, was proficient. Proceedings were accompanied by numerous ‘rounds of port wine on an empty stomach’ followed by a breakfast of more port, fried eggs, roast mutton, boiled pork, sweet cakes, preserved fruits, and cocoa. Earlier, a full dress parade of 100 barefooted native troops had turned into farce when they approached the saluting stand only to find the Governor’s car stalled in their path. Urgently hand-cranked into life, the vehicle showered the front rank with gravel as it pulled away just in time to reveal a gaping hole.

---

7 Fairbairn to Menzies, 28 July 1939, and N. C. Tritton to P. Hayter, 7 Aug. 1939, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/2/3; NAA: MP288, 2/22.
in the ground, dug to accommodate a new flagpole. Bravely the troops marched into the chasm, three feet deep and six feet wide, emerging, according to Dick Elford’s account, undismayed ‘with scarcely a kink in the ranks’.8

Diverting as the ceremonial formalities were, the mission was most notable for being the first time anyone had left the country, landed on foreign soil, and returned to Australia in a single day. The original itinerary had the Minister making the trip in a Qantas flying boat; but urgent repairs to the landing strip made it possible to use a Guinea Airways Lockheed 10A Electra airliner chartered by the Commonwealth government in the previous year.9 Although it was now available to carry ministers, the primary role of the plane was to assist in calibrating the radio navigation aids that were being brought into service to avoid the kind of accident in bad weather that befell the Kyeema. It was not Fairbairn’s first time in the aircraft. He had taken the controls ‘nearly all the way’ in a flight from Canberra to Sydney two months earlier. This, as the Sydney Morning Herald reported, was ‘the first time he had flown such a large plane’.10 The Dili trip also had a special personal significance for the Air Minister. His was only the third machine to land in Portuguese Timor. Dave Ross, who accompanied him, had flown the second. His late brother Pat had been the first.

On the evening of his return from Dili to Darwin, the Minister for Civil Aviation gleaned a shaft of spotlight at a ‘smoke social’ gathering of the Returned Soldiers’ and Sailors’ League at which the Minister for Supply and Development, Dick Casey, was the principal speaker. ‘Darwin,’ Casey had declared, ‘is the front door of Australia…the front line of Australia’s defence.’ Yes, Jim Fairbairn concurred, and it was his department that had made it so.11 It was not long before Fairbairn’s status was further enhanced. When war brought an imperative to build up the RAAF into a genuine fighting force, he was the obvious man to lead the new Air Ministry. Nor was there any doubting that he would retain the dual civil and military aviation responsibilities when some of his UAP colleagues had to make way for Country Party representatives in the reconstructed coalition government of March 1940. No-one was going to displace Jim Fairbairn.

8 ‘Visit to a little known land’, The Corian, Aug. 1939, pp.168–70.
9 Sydney Morning Herald, 24 July 1939; NAA: A461, 748/1/539.
10 Sydney Morning Herald, 19 May 1939. The Lockheed Electra (Model 10A), with a crew of two, carried 10 passengers, had two Pratt & Whitney R-985-13 engines, 450 hp (340 kW); span 55’, length 38’ 7”, height 10’ 1”; maximum speed 202 mph; range 713 miles.
A minister in full flight

‘Victory in this war will depend upon mastery in the air,’ the Minister for Civil Aviation told radio listeners at the beginning of October 1939. Two weeks earlier he had transferred his office to Victoria Barracks where he could be closer to the nation’s principal defence officials. He was vocal in informing the nation of plans to manufacture aircraft, recruit civil pilots as instructors, and train pilots and aircrew. The government had underestimated the desire of qualified private and commercial pilots to be posted to operational squadrons rather than be sidelined in training establishments. But the faltering expansion plans were about to be overtaken by the ambitious Empire Air Training Scheme. Naturally it fell to Fairbairn to travel to Ottawa to negotiate the details of the plan. As George Jones, who accompanied him, recalled:

There were some very interesting people on the ship, including a little movie actress. She played the poker machines in the cocktail bar two-thirds of the way across and then went to bed until the last day. And somebody came to her aid. I’m not going to say who, and she came up as large as life again, for more fun.

There were in fact several companies of actors and show people returning to North America from Australian tours. Fairbairn, long since cured of the shyness that school contemporaries had remarked on, was always ready for fun.

The conferences and private parleys to settle the Empire Air Training Scheme in a form acceptable to Menzies and the Cabinet were to test Fairbairn’s political mettle. While he was away, his authority grew with the announcement that he was to be Minister for Air — all of the air not just civil aviation. Conscious of the growing burden on Street as Minister for Defence, on 13 November 1939 the Prime Minister had split the portfolio into four elements. He created for himself the overarching role of Minister for Defence Co-ordination. Street was Minister for the Army, and Sir Frederick Stewart was Navy Minister. Fairbairn’s appointment was unique in Australian constitutional history. He was the first minister to be sworn in outside the country, the Canadian Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir (better known as the popular novelist John Buchan), performing the task in Ottawa, to the delighted curiosity of the press.

After finalising the terms of the Empire Air Training Scheme in London and making a quick trip to France late in 1939, Fairbairn flew back to Australia to take

---

12 Sydney Morning Herald, 9, 13 Sept., 2 Oct., 29 Nov. 1939; Canberra Times, 19 Sept. 1939.
14 Empire Air Training Scheme, War Cabinet paper, [ca. 30 Nov. 1939]. NAA: A2671 43/1939.
up the challenge of overseeing the development of recruiting depots, training schools, and new establishments to receive the thousands of men who were responding to the nation's call to arms. He had hoped to return in the company of Air Vice Marshal Richard Williams, expecting that Dicky Williams, currently exiled on secondment to RAF Coastal Command, would be re-appointed as Chief of the Air Staff. Williams and Fairbairn were old confidants. The then CAS had secretly briefed the backbencher Fairbairn to take up the Air Board's case against the Ellington Report during the 1938–39 Budget debates. Brought from Britain by the government in response to community consternation over a series of fatal accidents, Sir Edward Ellington had concluded that the training of RAAF flying instructors was ‘not altogether satisfactory’, and ‘a high proportion’ of accidents (the rate of which was allegedly worse than the RAF) were due to ‘disobedience of orders or bad flying discipline’.16 The Air Board had been outraged by what they saw as a superficial and inaccurate assessment of their performance by a ‘very shy and reserved’ man who had not faced them personally.17

Fairbairn, necessarily attacking his friend, Defence Minister Geoff Street, had carelessly used information in Parliament that could only have come from Williams. By so doing he seems, unwittingly, to have firmed the government’s resolve to replace the CAS. Behind the scenes, Williams was informed, there were at least three ministers (one of them almost certainly Dick Casey) keen to exchange him with an RAF man. Two senior Army figures, Sir Harry Chauvel and Sir Brudenell White, also had ‘a finger in the pie’. Whatever the origins of the advice, the government was determined to insist on accountability. As an embarrassed Geoff Street was to admit: ‘It is politically expedient for the Government to send you to England at the present time.’ Williams, celebrated in print as a man with no ‘pals or chums’ and with no known vices, had been made a scapegoat. With no satisfactory British officer available, he was replaced as CAS by his rival, Air Commodore S. J. ‘Jimmy’ Goble.18 Dissension and conflict in the senior ranks did not end there. Goble in turn was undermined, and lost the confidence of Fairbairn and, more importantly, the Prime Minister. He resigned amidst controversy within 10 months, misguidedly expecting that the government would accept his demand that a disloyal RAF officer on the Air Board would be removed.

Now, as Minister, Fairbairn wanted a man he knew and could trust by his side. By bringing Williams back as CAS he would be putting right the damage he had carelessly done to the RAAF leader’s career the previous year. But Menzies had

15. ‘A minister or a clerk?’; Jim Fairbairn (II)


18 Williams, These Are Facts, p.244; ‘Dicky was completely and absolutely “pure”’ (Sutherland with Ellison, Aces and Kings, pp.56–7).
other ideas. He was aware that Williams had divulged confidential information to Fairbairn to be used against the government, and that he had also stirred up agitation in the flying community. Menzies, believing with justification that there was no obvious Australian candidate apart from the unacceptable Williams, wanted an RAF officer to head the RAAF. He had briefed Stanley Bruce and Dick Casey, who was in London before Fairbairn, to begin the search for a suitable senior man. To Fairbairn’s chagrin, Menzies proved determined. Williams would not get the job. The British officer on offer, 62-year-old Air Chief Marshal Sir John Steel, had been recalled from retirement to become AOC Reserve Command just before war broke out. There was one other possibility, Air Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, an Inspector General of the RAF. Burnett was 57, had served in France and Palestine during the 1914–18 war, held senior Air Ministry appointments, commanded the RAF in Iraq, led the Training Command from 1936 to 1939, and was a member of the British Mission to Moscow in August 1939. He was a plausible appointee.

When he got back to Australia, Fairbairn allegedly told his old friend Group Captain Adrian ‘King’ Cole — Bob Hitchcock’s nemesis — a somewhat whimsical story:

> After negotiating with the Air Ministry he was sent to Portsmouth to interview the officer they had selected, and Sir Charles was sent with him to act as guide and make the necessary introduction. On the way down by car they got on so well together that Jimmy decided to have Burnett and not go with the ministry’s selection.\(^\text{19}\)

If it was not true, it should have been. Fairbairn had not wanted a British officer at all. He was prepared to consider Australian-born Air Chief Marshals Sir William Mitchell and Sir Arthur Longmore. Unless someone of their ‘standing, tact and energy’ was found, he told Menzies, he was convinced it was more advisable to recall Williams. As he told Harry Wrigley, rather less whimsically, he had quickly concluded that if Steel were appointed ‘he’d have been telling Cabinet what to do instead of Cabinet telling him’.\(^\text{20}\) He might have been influenced against Steel by the RAF representatives he had spoken to in Canada (ACM Brooke-Popham and AM Courtney). Something about Burnett, his forthrightness and sense of humour perhaps, an aura of authority and willingness to use it, made him the least worst option. Whatever the attraction, not only did Fairbairn reject the RAF nominee endorsed by Casey and approved by Menzies, he made sure that the British government and the chosen man understood that he saw the appointment as being for a term of just one year. Then, in a conscious act of defiance of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, he told Williams, whom he intended to promote to Air Marshal, that he would be recalled to Australia as second member of the Air Board, with the implied succession to Burnett.


\(^{20}\) AVM H. N. Wrigley, interview [1977].
Sir Charles Burnett: an outstanding personality at home, soon to be abroad
(Illustrated London News, 13 January 1940, Issue 5256, p. 55, courtesy of the National Library of Australia)
It was impossible for Menzies to deny Williams the higher rank, but the War Cabinet gave a clear signal to Fairbairn that he had overstepped the mark: they made the promotion temporary with no increase in pay, and decided explicitly that whatever post Acting Air Marshal Williams did take up would ‘not imply any right of reversion to the post of Chief of the Air Staff’. A baffled and annoyed Fairbairn had told Williams: ‘While I am to be politically responsible for the Air Force others are making arrangements which tie my hands so far as control of the efficiency of the Service is concerned.’ As Williams would put it in his memoirs: ‘By now Fairbairn was wondering whether he was a Minister or a clerk.’

On Fairbairn’s return to Australia, he explained to the War Cabinet that he was ‘under the erroneous impression that he had full authority to make an appointment to the post of Chief of the Air Staff’. Stanley Bruce had warned Menzies that ‘Fairbairn might feel impelled to resign if the commitment he entered into believing he was authorised to do so, was repudiated’. Disingenuous as Fairbairn’s apology was, it sufficed. When the new appointments were announced, the Prime Minister let it be known that henceforth there was to be closer ministerial direction of the Air Force, to which end the Minister for Air would preside at all important meetings of the Air Board. The government was saved the embarrassment of having to explain the supersession of Goble while letting it be seen that when Service chiefs disagreed with them, as Goble was understood to have done, the Cabinet would prevail. The message of firm ministerial control was reinforced by allowing photographers into Sir Charles Burnett’s first meeting of the Air Board on 20 February 1940. At the head of the table sat the Minister for Air, flanked on his left by Burnett but on his right by the civilian Secretary of the Board, F. J. Mulrooney. The Secretary of the Department of Air, Melville C. Langslow, who had been commissioned in the AIF Pay Corps and liked to be addressed as ‘Major’, was the only other member not in uniform.

The advent of a new regime was signalled that day by Fairbairn’s approval of a request to modify his own pre-war decision that no hardwood floors should be covered with linoleum. Henceforth RAAF Sick Quarters, Link Trainer rooms, bedrooms and passages for officers, cadets and NCOs, and passages in airmen’s quarters would all be quieter, cleaner, safer. Mel Langslow, installed as

---

22 Williams, These Are Facts, pp.252–6.
23 War Cabinet Agendum and Minutes, 4 Jan. 1940, NAA: A2673 80, A2670, 8/1940.
24 The Age, 5 Jan. 1940.
Secretary of the Air Department in the hope that his uncompromising frugality would contain any ministerial or CAS extravagance, might well have choked. The Air Minister himself had played no part in the selection of his departmental head. Like the heads of all the Service departments, each of them previously the Finance Members of their respective Boards, Langslow was the choice of the Prime Minister, guided by his close advisor Fred Shedden. Exhausted by the travel and travail of the last two months, Fairbairn was rushed to hospital, ordered to rest for several days. It was the second time in a month. To the irritation of his doctors he had risen from his bed to attend the War Cabinet on January 25. In conformity with the Prime Minister’s directive that he should chair significant Air Board meetings, he had previously summoned the Board to his hospital bedside to discuss the criteria for aircrew to be sought in a forthcoming recruitment drive.26

The press needed little prompting to sense the discontent within the upper ranks of the RAAF at the appointment as their Chief of a modestly regarded British officer nearing retirement, a man who had never been in Australia. Sir Earle Page, suffering the back-bench irrelevance of a discarded Country Party leader, had called the decision to appoint a non-Australian ‘staggering’ — a comment that might have been taken more seriously had he not been Deputy Prime Minister when Sir Ragnar Colvin and Ernest Squires were appointed from Britain to lead the Navy and Army. The government responded with selective briefing of its own, and crisp statements through gritted teeth by Fairbairn about Burnett’s ‘exceptional ability with the whole problem of training at his finger tips’. The Prime Minister won no friends in the RAAF by the tactless and contestable statement that ‘Air Chief Marshal Burnett is being brought to Australia so that we will not have to ask our very limited number of relatively senior officers to undertake a task far beyond their experience.’ The demonstrated dispensability of Goble and Williams, and the evident determination of Menzies, were chastening. Within days the Sydney Morning Herald’s aviation correspondent retracted, saying that a ‘careful check of opinion’ showed that a majority of RAAF officers supported the appointment. Not knowing whether they would be winners or losers under the new regime, those in the upper echelons were naturally divided. But the initial wounded pride of some top commanders was as nothing to their dismaying realisation that Burnett had little knowledge of the RAAF, little concern for the home defence of Australia, little regard for the men who were to sit around the Air Board table with him, and no intention of being in thrall to inherited arrangements and expectations. Like him or not, he

---

was their leader. Autocratic and abrupt as some senior colleagues would find him, he was to exhibit a ‘tremendous initiative and mental energy’ they had never previously encountered.27

![Image of The Air Board: happy at their work, July 1940](Courtesy of the RAAF Museum)

### A minister and his friends

At the outbreak of war there were 310 officers and 3179 airmen in the RAAF; there were an additional 194 Citizen Force and Reserve officers.28 Harry Cobby, rescued by Fairbairn, was an eminent representative of the oldest of several

---


identifiable cadres of RAAF officers. Most recently there had been an influx of commercial pilots and aero club members. The latter in particular were a concern for George Jones and others at HQ who thought that the aero clubs had been inclined to cut corners to get their paying customers through. The alleged failure of the government to use the schools to full capacity in the early months of the war would be the leading charge in a litany of criticisms published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in May 1940. The resumption of Citizen Air Force flying training in 1932 had opened a door for young men of means who liked to fly while pursuing a civilian career. Wilfred Brookes, for example, then a trainee with the family firm of Australasian Paper and Pulp Co. Ltd, had come through this door in a group of 30 in 1926. Before them in the 1920s and through the middle 1930s there had been a steady trickle of men who enlisted as cadets, some of them like Alan Charlesworth, Val Hancock, and Fred Scherger with previous Army experience, perhaps even Duntroon graduates. A small number of them had also enjoyed four-year commissions in the RAF. The Duntrooners, embraced by Dicky Williams for their supposed administrative competence, were regarded as a select race, resented by both younger and older men for ‘getting all the good posts’. The originals, survivors of the Great War in Europe and the Middle East, and of another two decades of flying in Australia and around the globe, had special bonds and memories. Cobby could recall with wonder and gratitude the training he received from Major Norman Brearley in the Gosport Instructors’ course. What Brearley did with an Avro ‘seemed to be, to me, impossible, and I thought I could fly’. 

Cobby, Dicky Williams, George Jones, Arthur ‘Spud’ Murphy, ‘King’ Cole, ‘Mucker’ Anderson, Lawrence Wackett, Frank Lukis, and others were uniquely connected. And Jim Fairbairn was one of them. Made a Wing Commander, and shortly afterwards promoted Group Captain, Cobby was appointed on 25 July 1940 as Director of Air Force Recruiting. On the same day Wing Commander Carn ‘Stiffy’ Wiggins arrived from the Department of Civil Aviation, where he had been Chief Electrical Engineer, to resume his old role as Director of Signals. Wiggins was the only member of the civil aviation administration who had emerged with his reputation intact if not enhanced by his appearances in the inquiries into the Kyeema disaster. Cobby soon found ex-colleagues everywhere: ‘the old team is back in harness…for the duration and whatever you want to do’.

---

31 ACM Sir Frederick Scherger, interview, 2 Sept. 1978.
period we are wanted for afterwards’. But not everyone was happy about the recall of the old team. Among the many unimpressed officers, Squadron Leader Stuart Campbell, himself summoned to service after 10 years in business and Antarctic exploration, would tell the war correspondent Gavin Long’s wife tales of appalling ineptitude and disorganisation. Four decades later Sir Frederick Scherger was still scornful of the appointment of Cobby and other ‘World War I chaps that persisted in spite of the certain knowledge that they lacked the necessary attributes to do the jobs they were posted to’.35

Getting the administration of the burgeoning RAAF to settle down into efficient routine was a taxing assignment for Jim Fairbairn. Constrained initially as he had been by a seniority system in which at the outbreak of war 16 of the top 56 officers were World War I veterans, he was gradually able to take advantage of the demands of an expanding organisation to bring in able men of business.36 For all his knowledge of the aviation world, finding the right men for new jobs was not easy. For the key role of Director-General of Supply and Production, devised by Burnett to replace the old Air Member for Supply, he was guided to one of A. B. Corbett’s former colleagues in the Postmaster General’s Department, the Chief Engineer Robert Lawson. As chairman of an interdepartmental committee investigating the administration of the Civil Aviation Board late in 1938, Lawson had quietly shifted to the Director-General and the Secretary of the Board as a whole much of the blame for the Kyeema disaster initially laid personally on the Finance Member Mel Langslow for his ‘insistence on the limitation of expenditure’. Langslow had found a sympathetic ally and Fairbairn recognised the value of an effective and fearless administrator. It turned out to be an outstandingly successful appointment; and Lawson stayed at the centre of RAAF business and technical affairs for the rest of the war.

Sometimes well-meant choices proved mistaken. For all his years in the civil aviation administration, for example, Harry Cobby was not cut out to direct a critical element of a complex, restructured, and rapidly growing wartime Service. He was popular with subordinates who were given latitude. Val Hancock thought him a ‘lazy bloke’ but a good leader with a gift for talking people into doing things for him.37 But he was uncomfortable in dealing with colleagues and superiors, some of whom were unimpressed by his cheery detachment. He was later to do good work in the field, perform heroically when a Catalina in which

34 Cobby, High Adventure, p.196.
35 Mary Jocelyn Long MSS, NSW State Library, ML MSS 7191; Scherger, interview, 2 Sept. 1978. Scherger did not mention, but doubtless had in mind, the debacle in 1945 when Cobby was found to have failed to maintain ‘a proper control over his command’ when eight of his officers submitted identical letters resigning their commissions in protest against the alleged futility of the operations in which they were engaged. Wiggins, a Duntroon graduate who transferred to the RAAF in 1925, was probably exempted from Scherger’s condemnation.
37 AM Sir Valston Hancock, interview with Ken Llewellyn, 30 June 1993, AWM: S01657.
he was travelling crashed at Townsville, but was to come to grief towards the
end of the war when unwisely posted to a senior appointment at Morotai by
George Jones, then the CAS. Like Lord Kitchener in 1914, however, if not a great
man he was certainly a great poster.\(^38\)

It was not all Cobby’s fault of course. But, with recruitment in an embarrassing
state, Fairbairn had to confront his critics. The *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily
Telegraph* had launched a scathing attack on the ‘scandal of air bungling’ late
in May 1940 alleging, in addition to recruiting chaos, training delays and a
shortage of machines for the EATS scheme. An incensed Minister responded
unwisely: ‘One or two aviation correspondents in Sydney are doing the work
of the fifth column...The articles could only have been written in three ways,
because of stupidity, because of bitterness against myself, and officers of the Air
Force generally, or subversively in the interest of the enemy.’\(^39\)

Predictably, the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* rejected the charges ‘as so
patently absurd and unworthy of any responsible Minister that it is charitable
to dismiss them as the product of temporarily uncontrolled emotions’. Unsubtle
he may have been, but Fairbairn did not lack political courage. In the House
of Representatives he hit back. The progress of the air training scheme was, he
pointed out, dependent on the provision of aircraft. That, he said, was partly
out of the government’s control. But, he admitted:

Certain mistakes are bound to be made in an undertaking of this size...I
would like to remind the House and outside critics that the R.A.A.F. is
endeavouring to set up a bigger organisation than the Broken Hill Pty
Ltd in less than 18 months.

Our recruiting staff, which now numbers 397, is comprised almost
entirely of men who have offered their services from civilian life.

It would be ridiculous to expect that an organisation of this size, staffed
by men with great enthusiasm but little experience would make no
mistakes in the big and intricate job of dealing with more than 80,000
applications from young men wishing to be pilots, observers, air
gunners, educationists, electricians, fitters, air riggers, flight mechanics,
cooks and a dozen other occupations.\(^40\)

Fortunately for Fairbairn his friend Sir Harold Luxton, ex-RFC, shot down
in August 1917, ex Lord Mayor of Melbourne, ex-UAP MLA, and racehorse
breeder, had already provided the answer. Luxton was chairman of directors

---

\(^38\) J. D. Walker, ‘Red Tape or Red Blood: Civil Aviation Administration in 1938’, *Tempus Aerianus: Australian
\(^39\) Aircraft, 18 (9), 1 June 1940.
\(^40\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 1940; *The Herald*, 29 May 1940.
of the National Mutual Life Association where his vice-chairman, Sir Brudenell White, had just been recalled to service as Chief of the General Staff. Very early in the war Luxton, who also chaired the board of the Metropolitan Gas Company, had released his assistant manager at the gas company, Albert Chadwick, to help with equipping the proposed six-squadron air expeditionary force. Now Luxton himself would take a lead as Victorian director of the Empire Air Recruiting Committee. More important, when listening to Fairbairn’s woes over a drink at the Melbourne Club in April 1940, he had suggested that Chadwick, his key executive and sales controller, a wartime air mechanic with Dicky Williams’s No. 1 Squadron Australian Flying Corps and now a pilot officer in the Reserve, was the man to sort out the paralysing organisational muddle and inundation of letters from potential recruits. As Recruiting Liaison Officer, appointed ‘by special arrangement’ and rapidly advanced in rank to squadron leader, Bert Chadwick had set about reorganising the recruiting program. Initially confronted with 12 wheat sacks of mail — there had been 68 000 applications by March 1940 — he brought in other men he could trust, and conquered the chaos.41

As long as his position was not slighted Cobby was content to be an affable figurehead. With direct access to the Minister, Chadwick, effectively supported by Dick Elford in turning oral briefings into appropriate documentation, created a network of over 500 local committees, each headed by the town or shire clerk or some other ‘worthy’, and including people like headmasters and RSL sub-branch presidents. When regular public servants resisted allocating funds to recruiting committees flushed with devolved authority to spend, Fairbairn successfully took the issue to Cabinet. It was not long before Chadwick also ended the cosy, inefficient, and inequitable practice by which RAAF officers and airmen were directing friends seeking to enlist to amenable staff officers in the Directorate of Recruiting. Henceforth all enquiries were to be passed to the recruiting centre in Queen Street.42

As for the Air Minister himself, not only friends, and friends of friends, but relatives as well, all of them able and eminently qualified, were being drawn into positions where they could be useful. There was no disguising the influence that had brought Osborne Fairbairn into the RAAF in April 1940, ‘persuaded’ by his brother, as his daughter ruefully recalled, to lead No. 1 Wireless and Air Gunnery School (EATS 1 WAGS) at the Ballarat Showgrounds.43 The Minister

41 Gavin Long, The Six Years War: A Concise History of Australia in the 1939–45 War, Australian War Memorial and AGPS, Canberra, 1973, p.27. RAAF aspirants outnumbered AIF and RAN applicants three to one and nearly 10 to one respectively. So congested was the RAAF recruiting organisation that 25 per cent of those who signed applications did not respond when eventually called up.
43 Alethea Russell to CH, (email), 20 Jan. 2009. At the time, in addition to his property responsibilities, Osborne Fairbairn had in his charge four children of his own, his orphan niece, and two British evacuees.
may not have played a direct part in bringing his brother-in-law Ross Grey-Smith into the RAAF’s Administrative and Special Services Branch, but the well-known connection could not have been a hindrance. Grey-Smith, a solicitor, was a former committee member of the Royal Victorian Aero Club. Commissioned on 2 July 1940, he became chief instructor at the School of Administration, which opened at Laverton on August 6.

Three weeks later, Fairbairn was confronted with a dilemma which could not be resolved by anyone else, friend or relative, and for which none of his previous experience had prepared him. To make an intrinsically sensitive problem worse he was required to reject the wishes of the Chief of the Air Staff. It was the delicate matter of precedence among the RAAF chaplaincy. Burnett, briefed by Williams, had thought it sensible to follow the British practice of giving chaplains rank and designating a Chaplain-in-Chief. Given that 45 per cent of RAAF personnel were Anglican it seemed to them natural that a chaplains’ branch should be headed by an Anglican. But they had not counted on the combined resistance of Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist representatives who gathered at a conference with Burnett and the Director of Personal Services, Group Captain Joe Hewitt, on 19 July 1940. In unison the churchmen pointed out that there was no Established Church in Australia and the idea of Anglican primacy was unacceptable. To consolidate their position, Monsignor P. F. Lyons, instructed by Archbishop Daniel Mannix, called on Fairbairn the next day, a Saturday, and elicited from him a signed confirmation that Burnett had been right to accept their argument: the Australian Constitution knew nothing of an Established Church; therefore the four most senior Staff Chaplains would have authority only within their own denominations.44

Whatever the tribulations behind the scenes, in public as well as private, the Minister for Air did not disguise his pride in the potential achievement of the Empire Air Training Scheme. For the first time in Australian history, he had told a meeting at Wesley Church in Sydney on 4 February 1940, the nation had embarked on an enterprise ‘in which failure could mean complete disaster for the British peoples throughout the world and in which success can make victory and security against aggression certain’. He had already told the Prime Minister much the same thing: ‘The only activity that we have undertaken which could lead to the winning or losing of the war by our failure or success in carrying out our undertaking is the Empire Air Training Scheme.’45 It was a large claim that carried with it a huge burden of responsibility.

When Menzies had outlined the scheme in Sydney on 15 December 1939 he had foreshadowed that a total of 26,000 men would be trained, of whom 10,400 were to be pilots and 15,600 observers, radio operators and air gunners. Most were to be trained in Australia, except for a few thousand in Canada. Australia, Menzies said, would establish and pay for 34 new training schools, supply all aircraft for elementary training, and bear the estimated cost over three years of A£500,000,000. In return, Great Britain was to supply or pay for all engines required for elementary trainers, a proportion of the cost of the intermediate trainers (Wirraways), and all the aircraft for advanced training (Fairey Battles and Avro Ansons). Great Britain would also supply wastage replacements and spare parts for maintenance. Australian instructors were to be supplemented by instructors lent by the Royal Air Force. It was early February 1940 before the report of the Australian Air Mission at the Empire Air Conference in Ottawa was ‘noted by the War Cabinet’. By March, the scheme had expanded way beyond the original forecasts. The RAAF had enrolled 68,000 volunteers, 11,500 as aircrew. The first EATS course was inducted on April 29 at Somers in Victoria where the former Cabinet minister and heroic AFC escapee from Turkish captivity Tommy White, one of the first four graduates from Point Cook in 1914 and now back in uniform as a flight lieutenant (temporary squadron leader), was the commanding officer. But by July, in spite of stringent educational standards being applied, the flood of recruits for the RAAF itself was overwhelming the Air Force’s capacity to absorb them. Fairbairn had to tell the War Cabinet that training units could not be organised because of the difficulty in devising a syllabus and providing the necessary instructors.

Command and control

To cope with the massive growth of the Air Force at home, as well as the huge demands of the EATS, a new command system was announced in March 1940. It was designed, according to minutes for ministers as well as in the formal statement published on Anzac Day, to decentralise administration and allow headquarters staff to concentrate on major policy. In fact the new structure was not greatly different from what had preceded it. A great deal of authority remained at the centre, reflecting Burnett’s advice on how functions should be allocated. Fairbairn appears to have been content to let the irascible and

48 War Cabinet Minutes, 2, 9 July 1940, NAA: A2673, 283, 286. One reason why instructors were in short supply was the determination of qualified pilots to gain operational postings. Fairbairn himself tipped off Clive Caldwell during a chance meeting at the Australian Club that his course graduates were to become EATS instructors. Caldwell contrived to resign from the RAAF and re-apply for a later course (Kristen Alexander, *Clive Caldwell, Air Ace*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2006, pp.9–10).
indefatigable Burnett have his way on most professional matters. If the Minister
did not put his own stamp on the structure of the Air Force nor did he make
radical changes to the personnel who were to deliver on the ambitious program
for which he was responsible. With both Williams and Goble sidelined, their
pre-war rivalry no longer a source of tension for their subordinates, he could
hope for a more harmonious higher command group. But the men on whom he
was to rely were confirmed or assigned on the customary seniority principle
that had prevailed since the RAAF was created.

The Cabinet had endorsed a regionalised operational structure and a reorganised
Air Board.49 Though press releases and public relations briefings made it look
like a whole new regime, the truth was that the new regional commands were
in effect the same as the previous No. 1 (Melbourne) and No. 2 (Sydney) Groups
that had been created at the beginning of the war. The same men led them.
Thus a Southern Area command based in Melbourne was announced under
No. 1 Group’s Group Captain Harry Wrigley, with Senior Air Staff Officer Wing
Commander Leon V. Lachal and Senior Administrative Staff Officer Group Captain
Joe Hewitt, who would shortly become Director of Personal Services. A Central
Area command with headquarters in Sydney was still to have Air Commodore
A. T. ‘King’ Cole as Air Officer Commanding. Cole’s Senior Air Staff Officer was to
be Wing Commander Alan Charlesworth; the Senior Administrative Staff Officer
was Wing Commander D. E. L. Wilson. The man on whom Sir Charles Burnett
had come to rely more than anyone else, Group Captain W. D. ‘Bill’ Bostock,
remained Deputy Chief of Air Staff with Wing Commander (promoted to Group
Captain in June) F. M. ‘Dad’ Bladin as Director of Operations and Intelligence.

At least one of the appointments Fairbairn initiated personally was that of
his EATS travelling companion and advisor, temporary Group Captain George
Jones, formerly Assistant Chief of Air Staff, to become Director of Training in
the branch of the Air Member for Personnel, Air Commodore W. H. Anderson.
Fred Scherger, who then held the post was in effect demoted to Assistant
Director. ‘I think it is better that we have a World War I man there’, Fairbairn
told Scherger after the younger officer returned from Perth to find Jones sitting
in his office. ‘Oh boy, you swallow hard when that happens.’ Scherger bore no
grudge. Fairbairn, he said, was ‘a remarkable man, a ton of guts, by jove he was
a courageous bloke and a damn good pilot’.50 Although he did not know all of
these senior men well, Fairbairn knew most by reputation. Some were indeed
very old friends. Adrian ‘King’ Cole, like George Jones a wartime AFC ace, had
been in the same house at Geelong Grammar School. Cole, two years older than
‘Jimmy’, had taught the youngster to ride his bicycle in 1908 ‘in order to gain

---

Narrator F/O G. E. Mayman, AWM: 54 81/4/143; The Herald, 4 March 1940.
50 ACM Sir Frederick Scherger, interview, 2 Sept. 1978.
permission to ride it myself’. Meeting up again after the war, Cole recalled, ‘At a Picnic Racecourse in Queensland, where I had landed in the course of an air survey in 1919 in exchange for a spectacular “Joy Ride”, he had helped me to “pick the card” for the only time in my life.’

Men at the top whom the Minister could trust were a start. But critical also to the rapid expansion of the Air Force was securing candidates for flying training who conformed to the RAAF’s desiderata. By March 1940, Fairbairn had been briefed on the difficulty in recruiting young men with sufficient knowledge of mathematics and physics. To his dismay he learned from the officer in charge of the recruiting depot in Melbourne that the six associated public schools together were sending fewer applicants for training as air crew than the Melbourne Technical School. His blood, he said, ran cold at the news. But there was some comfort from his own school. He was delighted to learn that James Darling, the headmaster of Geelong Grammar, was signing an average of two applications for the Air Force every day. Darling admitted he was uneasy about signing testimonials for boys who did not have intermediate maths and physics: ‘I am afraid I have been rather reckless about their educational qualifications and hope that this will not be a trouble for somebody else.’ Fairbairn hastened to re-assure him:

Not only is the Air Training Scheme the most important part of the Commonwealth’s war effort, but air crew trainees will have much greater opportunities of having their capacity utilised to the full than those who join the A.I.F. in view of the fact that 50 per cent of pilots and observers will receive commissions upon the completion of their training. As a great number of the trainees will be young men who have had barely the required education, any boy with reasonable personality and initiative who has had a public school education should be almost certain to receive a commission.

In April 1940, having seen the senior postings in the RAAF settled, Fairbairn was at last completing the reorganisation of the Civil Aviation Department. But there was a stumbling block. The Director-General wanted as his Assistant Director-General, Captain E. C. Johnston DFC, the former Controller-General of Civil Aviation. The Public Service Commissioner, Frank Thorpe, queried the appointment, noting the adverse findings of the Kyeema inquiry which reflected badly on Edgar Johnston. Fairbairn had no reason to favour an official whose department had been denounced for the shortcomings that he held responsible for the death of his friend Charles Hawker. Johnston had been passed over when...

Corbett was brought in. But the Minister had come to appreciate his formidable knowledge of Australian aviation. Perhaps too he had a lingering regard for Johnston’s outstanding war record as an RFC ace with 20 victories. Seeking to break the deadlock, Fairbairn wrote to Menzies asking him to intervene on Johnston’s behalf. Menzies’ private secretary Corby Tritton, assuming that the Prime Minister would comply with the request, drafted a personal letter to the Public Service Commissioner for his chief to sign. But Menzies baulked. Tritton was instructed to advise Fairbairn’s private secretary, Elford: ‘In the light of the evidence of the Kyema report the Prime Minister feels it would be improper for him to take action as Mr. Fairbairn suggests.’

Undeterred, Fairbairn wrote again to Menzies. Ignoring the undisguised rebuke, he began by saying that he understood from Tritton that the Prime Minister wanted ‘further advice’. He admitted that he had at first himself been ‘somewhat prejudiced against Johnston’. But he had found him ‘most efficient’ and he had done excellent work in negotiations with airline companies and in connection with the soon to be inaugurated trans-Tasman service. The failure to confirm Johnston and other senior officers of the department was creating a state of uncertainty that was not only unfair but impairing efficiency. Menzies was unmoved. While he was not going to comment on the merits of individual officers, he would not seek to influence the decision of the Public Service Commissioner.53 Fairbairn might well have suspected that Menzies’ lack of enthusiasm for Edgar Johnston stemmed from his opposition to ceding control of the Empire Air Mail Scheme route from Singapore to the British. Johnston’s preference for all-metal American aircraft over the British flying boats favoured by Menzies compounded his offence.54 Had Fairbairn been privy to Menzies’ diary of his trip to Britain in 1935 he would have realised that the Prime Minister thought Johnston ‘dull’ and a ‘man of limited vision’.55

In the end Fairbairn prevailed. But the Johnston appointment, like the appointment of Sir Charles Burnett at the beginning of the year, was evidence of a certain uneasiness in his relations with the Prime Minister. There had been early signs just before the war. A rambling submission by the Civil Aviation Minister on prospective British trans-Pacific air services and their possible impact on relations with the United States had left the Cabinet floundering. Menzies assumed principal responsibility with Gullett for preparing replies on the subject to the British and New Zealand governments, Fairbairn himself being effectively superseded.56 All of this was of course concealed from public view.

53 Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/581/22.
55 Ewer, Wounded Eagle, pp.58–68.
56 Agenda 121, 3 August 1939, NAA: A2697, vol. 2.
Mount Elephant homestead and its châtelaine

(The Australian Women’s Weekly, 6 January 1940, p.42, courtesy of the National Library of Australia).
Nor did the public get wind of the conflict underlying Fairbairn’s announcement on 18 April 1940 of the War Cabinet’s decision to place an order for 49 additional Hudson ‘reconnaissance bombers’ with spare engines and parts. The truth was that a significant doctrinal shift had occurred in Australian defence thinking. Relying on Burnett’s advice of ‘a continuous lessening of the probability’ of a Japanese attack on Australia, Fairbairn had advised his colleagues to cancel an order for Beaufighters for a proposed fighter squadron. The Defence Committee had come round to the RAAF’s view that it was essential to have a sea reconnaissance and bomber capability with which to find and destroy the enemy rather than rely upon intercepting hostile aircraft in the air. Fairbairn had announced the arrival of the first batch of Hudsons in Sydney on January 26. The new machines were to replace the Avro Ansons that were being phased out of service for home defence, with 18 set aside to equip a new squadron. The Hudsons, 86 of which were already in the country though many were still in crates awaiting construction, were, the Minister said, a great acquisition because of their reliability, power, and endurance. What he naturally did not disclose was that the recommendations of the Air Board which he had taken to the War Cabinet had been questioned by the Treasury Finance Committee, undermined by the Secretary of the Department of Defence Co-ordination, and barely secured the acquiescence of the Chief of the Naval Staff and the Chief of the General Staff. In the end, a reluctant Menzies had tipped the balance in favour of the Defence Committee’s advice. Menzies had been cautioned by an unenthusiastic Shedden that it would be risky, as public opinion began to focus more on local than Imperial defence measures, to take the responsibility of not adopting the decision of the defence chiefs ‘unless financial considerations absolutely preclude such a course’.

Finally, with the Prime Minister’s concurrence, Fairbairn was to all intents and purposes admonished in a War Cabinet decision in which ‘grave disapproval’ was expressed of negotiations that had begun in Australia with Brown and Dureau, local agents of the Lockheed Corporation, instead of with the Commonwealth representative in the United States who was charged with making all purchases. The point was driven home by the ‘instruction’ that all future aircraft purchases should be made through the recently created Aircraft Production Commission

---


run by Menzies’ appointee Harold Clapp. After so much tension it was something of an anti-climax when a month later Winston Churchill’s Minister of Aircraft Production, Lord Beaverbrook, let it be known that the embattled British wanted the next batch of Hudsons, and Menzies agreed to their diversion to England. By late June, however, the War Cabinet was ready to accept the RAAF’s expansion plan entailing an increase in the Home Defence Force from 19 (nominal) to 32 squadrons: seven would be reconnaissance bomber squadrons, another three would be ‘general purpose’, one was to be flying boats, with two fighter squadrons to be acquired later.

There were legitimate differences of view between the Service chiefs about the priority to be given to the acquisition of extra Hudsons. Yet more than once on matters in which a minister might well feel that his judgment and preference should be accepted, Fairbairn had to fight hard to carry the day. With the Air Minister bearing the liability for decisions on the Empire Air Training Scheme that sometimes were forced upon him, the Prime Minister could allude jocularly to seeing placards insisting ‘Fairbairn must go’. It was small comfort to read that Menzies had reminded the public that:

> At the moment the question of whether or not Mr Fairbairn gets the sack is for me and he is not getting the sack because I happen to think that he is a pretty good minister and I know that no-one in Australia could have worked harder to make the scheme a success.

If, as a result of some of this faint praise and of other dissonances, there was a slight coolness between the Air Minister and the Prime Minister it was barely perceptible to outsiders. But Fairbairn had reason to feel that Menzies did not accord him the respect appropriate to his role. Menzies was clever but not clever enough to hide his lack of appreciation for minds less agile than his own. Fairbairn was no intellectual. Audrey Elford, his private secretary’s widow, remembered that he seemed to rely very heavily on her husband and departmental officials. Lady White, daughter of Alfred Deakin and wife of Sir

---

59 War Cabinet Minutes, 17 April 1940, NAA: A2673, 165. The background to the decision to order 31 Hudsons and 16 spare engines (not the 49 announced the next day) is in NAA: A5954, 232/10 and A705, 9/19/177. Brown & Dureau, who advised Lockheed about long-term prospects for US aircraft sales in Australia, were receiving a commission of $2000 per plane on the first 100 Hudsons (Lockheed Archives: Brown & Dureau, file 092-0-5, Box 77761; Box A5189).
60 ‘Transfer of Lockheed Hudsons to Britain (together with Twin Row Wasp Engines for Hudsons)’, NAA: A1608, G17/1/2; War Cabinet Minutes, 28 May 1940, NAA: A2673, Agendum 114/1940. ‘Before an intended programme can be proceeded with, changes in the International situation throw it in the melting pot, and discussions from a new beginning are necessary’ (D. H. Dureau to S. W. Voorhes, 11 June 1940, Lockheed Archives: Box A5189).
62 Sydney Morning Herald, 8 June 1940.
Thomas White, a minister in the Lyons Cabinet, recalled her husband’s friend as a pleasant man, but ‘not brainy’. On the other hand, Percy Spender, who sat with him in Cabinet, rated him a ‘most competent man undaunted dedicated to the performance of any task allotted to him’. As a minister, Spender placed him with ‘Doc’ Page and John McEwen, and above the efficient but obtrusively dignified Dick Casey.

What Jim Fairbairn had was an understanding of character gained under fire and in perilous flight. It was something that Menzies’ cerebral superiority would never match. Fairbairn had experienced the drudgery of backbench life. He had an acute awareness of the impact on the reputation of a minister and his department of failures to respond promptly and courteously to inquiries and requests from fellow MPs. In April and again in June 1940, he signed remonstrances prepared by Dick Elford at the ‘lack of proper organisation and supervision’ that was causing him embarrassment with his parliamentary colleagues. What he understood about men was politically important. What he knew about aircraft and aviation made him a uniquely informed minister. As a discomfited RAAF senior hierarchy learned, he took seriously the criticisms that reached him from units about administration and equipment. An approachable minister, trusted and detached from the chain of command, could be better informed about the state of morale than headquarters staff.

George Jones, who had risen from the ranks and was not given to indiscriminate praise, worked closely with his Minister on their trip to Canada in 1939: ‘I thought he was pretty bright’, was Jones’s later judgement. Bright or not, the vastly experienced flyer Scotty Allan testified, Fairbairn had:

> a lively interest in all factors connected with aviation. We therefore talked about those affairs — general training of pilots which was rather sketchy at that time, civil aviation regulations, air navigation — even meteorology as applied to aircraft movements and how much pilots ought to know or be taught.

Fairbairn’s was no academic interest. When the opportunity presented, he would find out for himself what his RAAF flyers were encountering. Thus, on 6 July 1940, the *Argus* reported that the previous day he had ‘thoroughly tested’ one of the RAAF’s new Fairey Battles, Britain’s fastest bomber. Strapping on a parachute, he had taken to the air at Laverton with the station commander, Group Captain Frank Lukis. Five days later he was to fly without a parachute in

---

64 Lady White, interview, 3 June 1977.
a War Cabinet meeting. As an unusually detailed minute recorded, the Minister for Air ‘raised without Agendum’ his alarm about the possibility of Pan American Airways being given landing rights in Australia. To do so would be to give away an important ‘bargaining counter’ for landings in Hawaii by a British trans-Pacific service. The American company’s ‘methods of achieving their ends’ were, according to Australia’s ambassador in Washington, ‘circuous and notably lacking in frankness and honesty’. And, after having been sidelined when he had raised the issue a year earlier, Fairbairn was gratified by the War Cabinet’s decision to insist on government-to-government negotiations on the question of reciprocal rights.70

As the massive effort of recruiting, training, testing of new equipment and machines, and deployment of squadrons gathered speed, Fairbairn decided to fly on a morale-building tour of inspection around the nation. War Cabinet had contemplated that the Director-General of Information might use his regulatory powers to counter a barrage of press criticism, from the Daily Telegraph in particular.71 Fairbairn affected disdain: ‘Splenic outbursts against me are of no consequence.’72 The Air Minister would admit publicly on July 23 that the response to the recruiting drive had exceeded all expectations. There were 2000 RAAF recruits waiting to be called up. Many prospective pilots would have to wait until the resources were available for intermediate training. Arriving at Darwin after a 1200-mile flight from Brisbane via Rockhampton, Cloncurry, and Daly Waters, he was met by an escort of four Wirraways from No. 12 Squadron. ‘I would not like to fly over this country all day long like those fellows with single engine machines,’ he told reporters. ‘It is tough enough with a twin-engined machine.’ On the ground there was a frank discussion with the Station Commander, Group Captain Charles Eaton, whose 14-point agenda included delays in construction of the base, inadequate defences, a shortage of spares and equipment, and promotions. Fairbairn was impressed with what he saw. On his return he sent a message to Eaton that he ‘was particularly pleased with the keen-ness and efficiency of all ranks of the station’. The very high morale was, the Minister added, ‘particularly praiseworthy in view of the definitely difficult conditions under which all have been living and working since the establishment of the station’. For their part Eaton and his team found ‘his cheerful presence and vigorous optimism were an encouragement and inspiration to all’.73

Three Hudsons on display for the Minister, Darwin July 1940

(Courtesy of John Harrison)

The flying Minister for Air arrived back in Melbourne in record time after long hops from Perth and Adelaide. In Perth he had paused long enough to assure a ‘national party luncheon’ audience that there was method in the government’s ‘dalliance’ over airframe production (engine production was lagging and recruitment had already overtaken the ‘ambitious’ Ottawa program). And, if they were worried about enemy raids, they should know that bombers could be assembled anywhere between Perth and Cape York within five hours. When Fairbairn reached Melbourne, he had been away 12 days and covered 6700 miles in 46 hours and 47 minutes’ flying time. In his absence he had missed a two-day War Cabinet meeting in Melbourne during which the Chief of the Air Staff was grilled by the Prime Minister. What was the schedule for aircraft deliveries from Britain? Why were so many recruits being rejected in Victoria (a question that Fairbairn had dodged a fortnight earlier by reference to Air Force insistence on high educational standards)? What was the situation with Hudson aircraft which were rumoured to be crashing? What was the status of the proposal to increase the size of the RAAF to 32 squadrons? What prospect was there of obtaining aircraft from the United States if previously expected British Ansons and Battles did not arrive? For Burnett to be subjected to such an inquisition when his Minister was not there might have been justified if the matters raised were urgent. They were not. It could be seen as another example of Menzies’ disrespect for a senior ministerial colleague.

74 The Argus, 30 July 1940.
75 The Argus, 2 Aug. 1940.
In May, the Minister for Air had made known a Cabinet decision that much of the repair and overhaul work on the 1700 aircraft required for the Empire Air Training Scheme would be carried out by civilian contractors. On Sunday, August 4, Fairbairn announced a new plan to use every suitable aeroplane, private or commercial, from September onwards to maintain the momentum of training under the Empire Scheme. At the same time, he rejected an offer of a civilian committee to train a home defence force of 1000 airmen. In the unadorned speech for which he was known, he pointed out that there was no shortage of elementary training. It was advanced training that was the problem. It would be ‘a waste of time for instructors, men and petrol to give elementary training to hundreds of more men than we could train further’. He said nothing of the vexing issue of how best to deploy the existing pool of experienced senior captains. If he knew the extent to which this very real dilemma had been rippling through RAAF headquarters he gave no hint of it. Nor was there any mention of the decision of the Chief of the Air Staff four days earlier to begin planning for a large number of training aircraft to be ‘operationally equipped and manned to form a potential second line reserve home defence force’.

Determined to put his stewardship in a better light, the following weekend Fairbairn had his department release comprehensive statistics on recruitment. The RAAF had accepted 22 000 ground personnel in addition to 7894 air crew personnel accepted under the Empire Air Training Scheme. These figures did not include cadets in training, calling up of reservists on mobilisation, selection of civil pilots as instructors, and administrative, medical, and equipment officers. Of the ground personnel, 15 631 were already serving and 6969 were on the waiting list. Air crew personnel under training totalled 1416 and 6278 were waiting to be called up. It was a good story.

When Parliament had resumed on August 6, Fairbairn flew up from Melbourne the day before in the new Hudson A16-97, fitted out at his request for important passengers. Flying Officer Bill Heath of No. 2 Squadron was at the controls. It was the Minister’s second recorded flight in one of the RAAF’s latest machines. A week later, on August 13, he was to fly up to Canberra in the air-conditioned and sound-proofed special aircraft for the second time. As well as War Cabinet business he would be meeting with aviation pioneer, P. G. ‘Bill’ Taylor, to discuss a proposal of Taylor’s — previously rejected by the Chiefs of the Naval and Air Staffs — to roam around the Pacific in a P.B.Y. (Catalina) flying boat surveying for future air bases and watching for German raiders. Take-off on August 13

77 The Advertiser, 16 May 1940.
78 Canberra Times, 5 Aug. 1940. p.3.
80 More detailed figures were released over the next two weeks (The Argus, 12, 24, 26 Aug. 1940).
was to be at a gentlemanly hour. An RAAF sergeant driver would collect the Minister in good time. So there was no reason why he could not do his regular exercises. Since he had hung in his dressing room a vibrant study of the touring dancers Baranova and Petroff in full flight in *Swan Lake*, he said, ‘a grace which wasn’t apparent before has made itself apparent in my early morning exercises’. ‘There is grace and vigour in every line of the picture’, he had confided to *The Argus* at a showing by the 21-year-old artist Loudon Sainthill in April 1939. What he thought of the portrait of Peggy done by Sainthill in her Berkeley Square apartment a year or so later is not recorded. Sainthill’s work seems to have been a rare enthusiasm the Air Minister shared with Bob Menzies, who had opened the artist’s exhibition at the Hotel Australia.82 There would be no opportunity to talk to the Prime Minister on this trip. But Fairbairn could look forward on the flight to another instructive conversation with an experienced Hudson pilot. There was a lot to learn about the new aircraft.

---

82 *The Argus*, 4 April 1939.