



Te Matataua

Issue 3, Dec 2016

RNZAF

Air Power Development Centre Bulletin



RNZAF Chaplaincy during the Pacific War

"... we are part and parcel of the Defence Force; not whipping troops into a frenzy or encouraging them into battle; but, helping them to navigate the moral minefield of bearing deadly force when ordered to do so."

Rev. John Neal, former RNZAF chaplain, Radio NZ interview 28/8/15



RNZAF fighter pilot describes an action to Rev. Father W. W. Ainsworth, July 1943

Christmas is almost upon us and it is appropriate to consider how chaplains helped airmen fighting in the Pacific during World War Two. The role of the chaplain extended far beyond serving the religious needs of personnel. They provided guidance on all manner of welfare and life issues affecting young airmen stationed at remote islands in the thick of war.

Chaplains were allocated few resources to undertake their duties where they relied on their ingenuity, faith and the unwavering support of American chaplains. The work of RNZAF chaplains in the Pacific helped to form the basis of modern chaplaincy support to the air force today.

RNZAF personnel stationed in Fiji in late 1940 established a headquarters, two aerodromes and two flying boat bases. The first two chaplains arrived in Fiji in September 1942. Padre Williams attended to personnel in Suva, which was full of recreational activities that occupied the spare time of the men. So his primary focus was to help airmen with their personal problems such as domestic issues at home, homesickness, fitting into the war environment, depression and loneliness.

Padre Taylor, on the other hand, was posted to Nandi, which was an isolated station. He focussed on visiting gun batteries, establishing bible classes and regular church services; much of his time was spent organising entertainment for the men. Padre Taylor was later posted to Espiritu Santo, but felt he should be stationed with the airmen at Guadalcanal, the RNZAF's most forward operating base.

Father Ainsworth (Flight Lieutenant), who was also a pilot and spent time flying from Ohakea, was posted to Guadalcanal. The facilities were strictly limited, with no space available to use for services, and there was no transport available to reach the various RNZAF units scattered over a distance of 20 km. He overcame these obstacles by using an American chapel and a small tent for services. He also acquired a jeep and gained permission to fly an American Piper reconnaissance aircraft to visit personnel further afield.

As the war progressed, the US Navy and US Marine Corps were developing their amphibious assault capability. It allowed them to bypass main enemy strongholds and land on island beaches that were weakly defended. As the allies advanced, they quickly built airstrips to be in short striking range of Japanese held islands.

Father Ainsworth accompanied two squadrons to Ondonga, Solomon Islands, that had just been re-taken from the Japanese. The RNZAF was working alongside the USAAF providing bomber escort and close air support to ground forces fighting at Torokina, Bougainville. Work intensity was extreme for aircrew and ground crew, who worked strenuously to keep the aircraft maintained, often working throughout the night. Father Ainsworth was reported to follow the concept of St Paul, in being 'all things to all men' by helping men of all faiths without interfering in personal religious beliefs.

Chaplains shared the discomfort of airmen in the wartime facilities including running for cover during air raids by Japanese forces and helping to restore functionality afterwards. They were welcome figures in the pilots' mess and among ground crews as they continually gave encouragement and handed out cigarettes and sweets.

Christmas 1943 was celebrated throughout the Pacific with as much tradition as possible. Christmas dinner was cooked from food flown up from New Zealand and combined services were held with American troops. Throughout the war, chaplains maintained a hectic schedule travelling between islands visiting as many RNZAF personnel as practicable.

An RNZAF forward base was established within an allied perimeter on Bougainville after territory was gained from the Japanese. The base was frequently raided by bombers from Rabaul before the Japanese artillery and infantry made a determined push to drive allied forces off the island. Padre Larsen and Father Ainsworth were in the thick of the attacks, but maintained their presence and attended morning operational briefs to aircrew and greeted them again when they returned. During the day they tirelessly spent time visiting maintenance areas, offices, radar posts, defensive positions and hospitals. Daily services were maintained despite repeated shelling and the limit of 15 men in any area of assembly.

There is no disguising the horrors seen by airmen as they advanced towards the front line. CPL Bill Mitchell², RNZAF, describes the aftermath of an attack on Piva airstrip as “dense jungle decimated to stumps and like a ploughed field from the shell bursts. Seeing arms, legs and limbs sticking out everywhere was frightening. The smell of dead bodies in the tropics is something else; it is something you can't get rid of.”

As the number of bases grew throughout the Pacific, so too did the number of chaplains. By the end of 1944 there were eleven chaplains overseas. As the Japanese were pushed out of the Pacific the threat diminished, but the work of chaplains continued. Chapels were built on Island bases and transport became easier to obtain.

In some senses the work of the chaplains was harder during this period. With the Japanese threat removed and airmen settled into more relaxed conditions, their morale started to drop. There were too few tasks for the quantity of men, and war became a succession of hot humid days filled with dull routine work. A large part of the chaplains' work was now to keep boredom and discontent at bay.

Key Points

- Chaplains were a key part of RNZAF operational bases in the Pacific.
- They were exposed to the same dangers and hardships as all airmen in theatre.
- The underlying role of chaplaincy services to RNZAF personnel remains the same today.

References

1. The bulk of this text is summarised from the official history of New Zealand in the Second World War – Chaplains. Original spelling has been retained.
2. Quoted from www.privateletters.net/allies_newzealand.html
3. Headline quote: www.radionz.co.nz/audio/player?audio_id=201767898

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