

Chaplains in the Royal New Zealand Air Force

by Squadron Leader J. M. S. ROSS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Some of the material in this chapter on the work of [RNZAF](#) Chaplains during the Second World War has been drawn from official files in Air Force Headquarters; for the account of their work in the [Pacific](#) the author is indebted to a number of the chaplains who served there. Their help in compiling the story is gratefully acknowledged.

CHAPLAINS IN THE ROYAL NEW ZEALAND AIR FORCE

WHEN the [Royal New Zealand Air Force](#) was established in 1937 as a separate branch of the Armed Services it was recognised that provision would have to be made for chaplains to look after the spiritual welfare of the men. The Royal Air Force, on which the [RNZAF](#) was modelled, maintained a Chaplains' Branch in which regular chaplains served, wearing uniform and having the status of officers. In addition, officiating chaplains were appointed from among the local clergy to minister to members of their denominations in units where the station chaplain was of a different Church. In New Zealand it was felt that the projected size of the [RNZAF](#) did not warrant the establishment of a Chaplains' Branch, and it was proposed to appoint officiating chaplains to the various stations.

Nothing was done, however, in the pre-war years to put the scheme into operation, mainly because of difficulties in arriving at a decision on its financial basis. In the meantime, the initiative came from the Churches themselves. From time to time a member of the local clergy would ask permission to hold a service on one of the two stations then in existence—[Hobsonville](#) and [Wigram](#). This permission was nearly always forthcoming, but, as the Commanding Officer at [Wigram](#) pointed out early in 1938, such unofficial arrangements were not entirely satisfactory, and it was desirable in view of the actual and projected expansion of the Air Force that officiating chaplains should be appointed as soon as possible. The matter was raised several times at Air Department before the war, but apparently had always to give way to more pressing aspects of the [RNZAF](#)'s expansion programme.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 and the immediate and rapid expansion of the [Air Force](#) made the appointment of chaplains a matter of some urgency. After a number of meetings between the Air Force Member for Personnel and the Chaplains' Advisory Committee, the Air Board finally approved, in October, regulations covering religious observance in the Service and the payment of officiating chaplains. Some months later, in February [page 162](#) 1940, twenty-five chaplains were appointed. They had been nominated by their respective Churches from among the clergy living in the vicinity of the nine stations then in existence, and included representatives of six denominations. Their duties comprised the conducting of periodical Church parades and the visiting of stations under their charge as frequently as possible to give

religious instruction, as well as the other special tasks which fall to padres, such as visiting sick members of their Churches and notifying relatives when casualties occurred.

The conditions of their appointment made it difficult for them to gain satisfactory results from their work. A clergyman's chief asset is his personal relationship with his parishioners. On Air Force training stations even more than in Army camps, a great proportion of the men at that time were there for short periods only, and the chaplain had little opportunity to come to know them. As he did not live on the station himself, his contacts with individuals were practically negligible. He had his own parish to attend to, and with the best will in the world the most he could do for the [Air Force](#) was to conduct periodical services and spend possibly a few hours a week on the station. As he might live some miles away, even this made heavy demands on his time. Furthermore, the officiating chaplains were appointed because they happened to live within a reasonable distance from the stations. Consequently, it was not always possible to select men who were physically and temperamentally the best suited for the specialised work involved in looking after the spiritual welfare of young men, many of whom were living away from their own homes for the first time.

Appointment of full-time Chaplains

Realising this, the Chaplains' Advisory Committee strongly recommended that resident chaplains should be appointed, at least on the major stations. It was proposed that, as was the practice in the [RAF](#), they should have the status of officers and be permitted to wear uniform. This was approved by the Minister of Defence in August 1940. In October the first eight full-time chaplains were appointed and commissioned in the relative rank of Flight Lieutenant.

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Where it was possible, owing to the proximity of stations, chaplains of different denominations exchanged duties frequently. When this was not possible, and on stations where there was no resident chaplain, visiting chaplains continued to look after men of their own denominations.

With their appointment as regular members of the [Air Force](#), the chaplains were able to carry out their work more fully. In the main, they were men who had had considerable experience in the Ministry but who were young enough to take an active part in the sporting and other activities of their stations. Some of them had been Rugby footballers of note, and one or two were still active referees. Such accomplishments did more to secure them a place in the community life of their stations than perhaps any other.

There was, in most instances, a fairly close liaison between the chaplains and the [YMCA](#) secretaries. The YMCA had as its function the promotion of the welfare of the men—chiefly by the provision of reading and recreation rooms and of canteens serving afternoon teas and suppers. The chaplain had his study or padre's room in the [YMCA](#) building, and the reading room was converted for use as a chapel for Church parades.

Besides holding regular Church parades, most chaplains had informal services on Sunday evenings and weekly Bible Classes. On some stations they had a definite place in the training

syllabus, giving lectures to recruits on the spiritual, moral, and psychological aspects of service life. In addition to religious and general welfare work, they did much in helping individual men who had domestic and personal worries. Their problems were investigated by the chaplains who, where necessary, made recommendations to higher authority on compassionate postings and leave.

In 1941 the question of providing chapels was raised by the Church of England Military Affairs Committee. The YMCA reading rooms hitherto used were not entirely suitable for Church services. That at [Ohakea](#) was particularly unsatisfactory as it was located under a dormitory, and services consequently suffered from the noise of people walking about and talking overhead. It was proposed that the chapels should be provided by the Chaplains' Board and paid for by the National Patriotic Fund. The Air Board rejected the suggestion on the grounds that the existing premises [page 164](#) were satisfactory, contending that if one denomination was given authority to build chapels the others would want to follow suit, and that the resulting buildings would require manpower for their maintenance.

After it had been pointed out that a single chapel on each station would serve all denominations, and it had been reiterated that the cost would be borne by the National Patriotic Fund, the Air Board reversed its decision and authorised the building of chapels on the major stations. In the next two years chapels were built at [Hobsonville](#), [Whenuapai](#), Harewood, [Ohakea](#), [Levin](#), Wigram, [Rongotai](#), and [Woodbourne](#). They were known as [Air Force](#) Chapels and were under the control of the station chaplain, although available for the use of visiting chaplains of all denominations. In mid-1943 the [RNZAF](#) undertook to build chapels, where necessary, through its own works organisation, but owing to the low priority given to the work by the Commissioner of Works, it was well into 1944 before any construction was carried out under this policy.

For two years, the number of chaplains in the [Air Force](#) remained at eight. By September 1942, however, the size of the [RNZAF](#) in New Zealand had more than trebled; new stations were being built; over a thousand men were overseas in [Fiji](#) and [New Caledonia](#); and others were preparing to go to the [New Hebrides](#) and the combat area farther north. It was obvious that there was work for many more chaplains than the original eight.

Early in 1943 the Air Board adopted a proposal that the chaplains' establishment of the [RNZAF](#) should be increased to bring it in line with that of the Army, which provided for one chaplain to every thousand men. Once this principle was recognised, it was possible to appoint new chaplains as they became necessary, although in fact the number never reached the maximum allowed. The greatest number serving at any time was thirty-one; this was early in 1945. Throughout 1943 and 1944 appointments were made to a number of stations which had not hitherto had a chaplain and to new stations as they were formed. In addition, as the strength of the [Air Force](#) in the [Pacific](#) expanded, serving chaplains were posted overseas and their places in New Zealand taken by new men.

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In the [Pacific](#)

The first [RNZAF](#) chaplains to go overseas were Padres Taylor¹ and Williams,² who arrived in [Fiji](#) in September 1942. On arrival, Padre Williams was stationed at [Suva](#), while Padre Taylor went to [Nandi](#), on the opposite side of the island. New Zealand Air Force personnel had been stationed in [Fiji](#) since the end of 1940, and when the chaplains arrived the organisation comprised a headquarters in [Suva](#), an aerodrome at [Nandi](#), one at [Nausori](#), fourteen miles from [Suva](#), a flying-boat base in Suva Harbour, and another under construction at [Lauthala Bay](#) nearby.

Padre Williams found conditions at [Suva](#) very satisfactory and the opportunities for religious observance adequate. Recreational facilities were good, and tennis, football, yachting, launching, and swimming helped the men to occupy their spare time. In addition, a number of the European residents opened their homes to them and provided entertainment. There was little need for the chaplain to devote his energy to general welfare work, and much of his time was spent in helping the airmen with their individual problems. Inevitably they were numerous. Men wanted advice on domestic troubles at home. Others, youngsters away from home for the first time, found it hard to fit into their strange surroundings and suffered from depression and loneliness. A few indulged in escapades which involved them in trouble with Authority. To those who wanted him the chaplain was available for advice and assistance.

Padre Taylor, at [Nandi](#), had different conditions with which to contend. The station was isolated, cut off from [Suva](#) by the width of the island, and in contact with it only by air or by the long, winding coastal road. The white population of this side of the island was sparse and scattered, and the area had none of the amenities of urban civilisation which [Suva](#) possessed. Padre Taylor directed his activities into two main channels. As a churchman he found plenty of work to do among the men, many of whom had been at [Nandi](#) for a long time, during which they were without a chaplain. He held weekly services and Bible Classes for the [page 166 RNZAF](#) personnel and regularly visited the gun positions of the anti-aircraft battery which, scattered throughout the area, formed part of the defence of [Nandi](#). On Sundays Padre Taylor took up to four services for them, besides his own. There was plenty of social work for him to do, too. He joined forces with the two [YMCA](#) secretaries at [Nandi](#) and, helped by one of the local residents, they gave a lot of time and energy to providing entertainment for the men.

At the end of the year, [Nandi](#) was handed over to the United States Air Force and the [RNZAF](#) unit transferred to [Nausori](#). Here Padre Taylor found his work easier. Living conditions were bad at first for the camp was not completed, but the station was within reasonable distance of [Suva](#), and in the village of [Nausori](#) itself there were white residents who helped to entertain the men. Moreover, he was within a few miles of Padre Williams, who was now stationed at [Lauthala Bay](#), and the two were able to work together for the benefit of all the [Air Force](#) personnel in the [Suva](#) area.

After six months at [Nausori](#), Padre Taylor was replaced by Padre Churchill³ and was posted to [Espiritu Santo](#), being the first [RNZAF](#) chaplain to be stationed in the [New Hebrides](#). The island had been occupied by American forces in mid-1942 and developed as a forward base from which to launch the attack on [Guadalcanal](#). [RNZAF](#) units had been stationed there since October. His

arrival was the first provision for the spiritual needs of the New Zealanders there. Up till then, those who were actively interested in religion had gone to the services of American units nearby and at times an American chaplain had visited the camp; but no religious observance was officially organised. A short time afterwards a [YMCA](#) hut, which included a small chapel and a padre's room, was built.

Padre Taylor spent three months at Santo and worked hard to improve the spiritual and material welfare of the men. He was helped by the co-operation of the American chaplains on the island, who were always very willing to assist. Until the [YMCA](#) hut was built, he held Sunday services in the airmen's mess and had a small tent for weekly Bible Class meetings. The response to his work was good, and the Sunday evening services drew an increasing [page 167](#) number of men. During his stay there he officiated at the only [RNZAF](#) wedding to take place in the forward area—the marriage of a New Zealand airman to a French girl.

Although he found much to do at Santo, Padre Taylor felt that he should be stationed at [Guadalcanal](#), at that time the [RNZAF](#)'s most forward base, from which aircraft were operating daily against the Japanese; but it was not until late in September that he was able to go there for a few days before the end of his tour of duty in the tropics.

On Guadalcanal and [New Georgia](#)

Shortly before Padre Taylor left [Fiji](#) for [Espiritu Santo](#), Father Ainsworth⁴ was posted to [Guadalcanal](#) to look after the Roman Catholics in the forward area. He had previously started on a tour of the [Pacific](#) at the end of 1942, but as a result of an accident in [New Caledonia](#) had been forced to return by hospital ship to New Zealand. On arrival at [Guadalcanal](#) he found, as did all chaplains in the forward area in the early days, that his facilities were strictly limited. No tents suitable for services were available and no provision was made for transport, which was essential as [RNZAF](#) units were scattered over a distance of twelve miles. At first he used American chapels for Sunday services and a small tent for weekday Mass and evening meetings. The transport problem he solved by acquiring a jeep for his own use and he also obtained permission from the Americans to fly a Piper reconnaissance aircraft.

Father Ainsworth shared all the difficulties and discomforts of the squadrons—not the least of which were the air raids which were frequent at [Guadalcanal](#) at that time—and he spent most of his days among the men working on the landing strips. As the only [RNZAF](#) chaplain on the island for some months, he looked after men of all creeds in other than strictly denominational matters. To many of them he was already well known, as most of the aircrew had passed through the Initial Training Wing at [Levin](#) when he was stationed there.

In October 1943 two New Zealand fighter squadrons moved forward to [Ondonga](#), on [New Georgia](#). A month later, Father Ains- [page 168](#) worth, who had been doing a tour of the rear areas in the [Pacific](#), joined them there. The New Zealand units had been the first to occupy the airfield, which was in territory that had only recently been taken from the Japanese. At the time he arrived they were engaged, with American squadrons which had joined them, in providing daily cover for the forces that had landed at [Torokina](#), on [Bougainville](#). All ranks, ground staff

and aircrew, worked strenuously, the maintenance crews often working through the whole night to have aircraft ready to fly at daybreak.

The chaplain was a welcome figure in the pilots' mess and among the ground crews working on the airstrip—a never-failing supplier of encouragement, cigarettes, and chewing gum. In his clerical rôle he endeavoured to follow the precept of St. Paul, in being ‘all things to all men’, helping those of all creeds as far as was possible without interfering with individual religious beliefs. Besides his duties with the [RNZAF](#), he ministered to American Roman Catholic personnel stationed at [Ondonga](#). Two American chaplains, Padres Wilder and Burcham, also took a friendly interest in the New Zealanders and ministered to them as opportunity offered.

The readiness of American chaplains to help the New Zealanders, both in the exchange of services and in the loan or gift of chapels and equipment, was a very notable feature of service in the [Pacific](#). Particularly in the first two years, the [RNZAF](#) chaplain in the [Pacific](#) was very much on his own. He had nobody to go to for advice on his duties and no organisation in the area to which to look for the supplies he needed in his work. He had to take them with him or have them sent from New Zealand, and this often meant long delays. The Americans, with a well-established, well-equipped chaplains' organisation, were unstinting in their generosity.

Christmas, 1943, was celebrated throughout the [Pacific](#) as far as possible in the traditional manner, with special services and a special Christmas dinner cooked from rations flown up from New Zealand. At Ondonga a combined service was held by the American padres, Wilder and Burcham, on Christmas Eve, and on Christmas Day services were held by Padre Larsen,⁵ who had just arrived from New Zealand, and Father Ainsworth.

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There were by this time six chaplains with the [RNZAF](#) overseas. Padre Churchill was at [Nausori](#) and Padre Venimore⁶ at Lauthala Bay; Padre Williams at [Guadalcanal](#); Padre Osmer⁷ at Espiritu Santo; Padre Larsen and Father Ainsworth at [Ondonga](#). The last four looked after all the men of their denominations in the forward area. This involved much travelling, for the [RNZAF](#), besides the units at the main bases at [Espiritu Santo](#), [Guadalcanal](#), and [Ondonga](#), had small detachments scattered throughout the islands. Many of the isolated units were not visited by New Zealand aircraft, and the priority for chaplains on American transport planes was low. The individual chaplain thus had to use his initiative in finding means of transport.

The programme of a chaplain stationed at [Guadalcanal](#) late in 1943 illustrates the amount of travelling which was involved:

FIRST WEEK

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| Tuesday | Leave Headquarters Camp early in the morning by APC ⁸ for West Cape, where there was an RNZAF Radar Unit. This involved a trip of six hours. Hold Communion there and another service or a meeting. Move round among the men. |
| Thursday | Return to Guadalcanal , arriving in the evening. |

Friday and Saturday At Guadalcanal visiting the various camps: Headquarters Camp at Bloody Knoll, Islands Group Headquarters, Radar Headquarters, No. 2 Servicing Unit's camp, and a sawmilling camp some miles away. Hold various evening meetings and mix with the men.

There were also various hospitals to visit.

Sunday Hold two or more Communion services in the morning. Leave at midday for Halavo Bay, on [Florida Island](#), where an RNZAF Catalina squadron was stationed. Arrive there at 6 p.m. in time to hold an evening service.

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SECOND WEEK

Monday Leave Halavo at 8 o'clock in the morning by Catalina to visit the Radar Unit at [Malaita](#).

Thursday or Friday Return to [Guadalcanal](#) by APC and carry out the usual programme there.

THIRD WEEK

Monday Leave Guadalcanal in the morning by SCAT⁹ plane for [Munda](#). Spend some days there and with the Saw-milling Unit on Arundel Island and the Radar Unit on [Rendova](#) Island.

Friday or Saturday Return to [Guadalcanal](#).

The next week two or three days were spent at Halavo and the rest on [Guadalcanal](#), and then the whole round started again.

Work in the Forward Area

In mid-January 1944 the New Zealand fighter squadrons at [Ondonga](#) were moved forward to [Bougainville](#). Padre Larsen went with them and was thus the first [RNZAF](#) chaplain to be permanently stationed there. The area enclosed by the Allied perimeter was not large, and at [Bougainville](#) the New Zealanders were closer to the enemy's ground forces than they had been since the early days at [Guadalcanal](#). Until the middle of February they were frequently raided by bombers from [Rabaul](#). Early in March the Japanese brought up heavy reinforcements and made a determined effort with artillery and infantry attacks to drive the Allied forces off the island. All the camps and the airstrips within the perimeter came under fire, and for some days the area was dangerously uncomfortable.

When the attack developed Padre Larsen was joined by Father Ainsworth, who since Christmas had been making a tour of the rear areas of the [Pacific](#). Both chaplains had a busy time in the strenuous weeks that followed. They were with the aircrews in the early morning when they were being briefed for operations, and they greeted them again when they returned; during the day they [page 171](#) spent hours visiting the men in every workshop, office, and servicing revetment. Father Ainsworth held daily services for Roman Catholics at each strip, and in spite of the Japanese shelling and the fact that not more than fifteen men were permitted to be present at one time, large numbers both of New Zealanders and of Americans attended.

In 1944 and 1945 the [RNZAF](#) established itself at bases farther north and west, on [Green Island](#), [Los Negros](#), [Emirau](#), and eventually at [Jacquinot Bay](#), on the coast of [New Britain](#). As the number of bases grew, so too did the need for additional chaplains in the forward area. By the end of 1944 there were eleven chaplains overseas, of whom six were in the [Bougainville](#)-[Bismarck](#) area. During the last fifteen months of the war most [RNZAF](#) personnel in the [Pacific](#) had no experience of enemy action. The squadrons stationed at [Bougainville](#) and the other forward bases made daily sorties against [Rabaul](#) and against Japanese positions on New [Ireland](#) and on [Bougainville](#) itself; but the enemy's air forces had been cleared from the skies, and his land forces on [Bougainville](#) never again threatened the Allied positions there. Consequently, except for those engaged in flying operations, the war seemed to have receded a long way.

The work of the chaplains became at the same time easier and harder. In the absence of the threat of enemy attack, and with a certain stability in the Allied positions, it was possible to provide more amenities. Chapels were built at all the main [RNZAF](#) bases. Some, like that at [Espiritu Santo](#), were converted Quonset huts; others, like the one at [Los Negros](#), were built in native style with the help of the local islanders. With more settled conditions, too, transport and all types of equipment became easier to obtain, and chaplains no longer had to beg or borrow their requirements. On the other hand, with the stimulus of danger removed, it was increasingly hard to keep up the morale of the troops. To many men in offices, workshops, kitchens, and on the landing strips, the war was just a succession of hot, endless days of dull routine work and steaming, uncomfortable nights. The attractions of home and the discomforts of the tropics loomed large, and an important part of the chaplains' work was to keep tropical boredom and discontent from gaining the upper hand.

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Most of them ran evening discussion groups in which there was great scope for a chaplain to give lectures and listen to the men's opinions on many subjects—religious, ethical, artistic, and political. Religious discussion played relatively a larger part in islands' life than at home; not, perhaps, because the surroundings made men think more of their souls, but because all other topics eventually ran dry.

Until 1945, chaplains posted overseas to the [Pacific](#) were left to decide for themselves how they would go about their duties. Each was expected to use his initiative in planning his work and the visits he proposed to make to the widely scattered units which usually came under his care. Early in that year, however, the chaplains then stationed in No. 1 (Islands) Group came to the conclusion that they could work more effectively if one of their number was appointed Senior Chaplain to supervise and co-ordinate the work of all. This was recommended to Air Headquarters and to the Chaplains' Dominion Advisory Council, and, as a result, Padre Williams, who was on his second tour of duty overseas and was the most senior chaplain in the area, was appointed to the position. In that capacity he spent much of his time travelling throughout the area, visiting his chaplains and helping them in their work.

In the months following the Japanese surrender thousands of men returned to New Zealand to be demobilised, and by the end of 1945 only 700-odd remained overseas in the [Pacific](#). With their

task finished, the chaplains were repatriated too, and the majority of them went back to their peacetime work.

The foregoing chapter is a necessarily brief account of the development of the RNZAF Chaplains' Branch. The few chaplains mentioned by name are for the most part those who were first in the field, but they must be taken as representative of all, for all were men of grand calibre and all did magnificent work for their Church, the [RNZAF](#), and the men under their care.

¹ Rev. G. L. Taylor (Presby.); [Christchurch](#); born [Port Chalmers](#), 1900.

² Rev. W. T. Williams, MBE, (C of E); [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 1905.

³ Rev. J. Churchill (Meth.); [Auckland](#); born Northwood, England, 1909

⁴ Rev. Fr. W. W. Ainsworth, MBE, (RC); [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 1906.

⁵ Rev. K. T. F. Larsen (Presby.); Hokitika; born Copenhagen, [Denmark](#), 1903.

⁶ Rev. V. C. Venimore (C of E); [Wanganui](#); born [Wanganui](#), 1910.

⁷ Rev. E. A. Osmer (C of E); [Christchurch](#); born Ross, 1901.

⁸ Coastal transport.

⁹ Service Command Air Transport.

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Member of the Order of the British Empire

- W. W. Ainsworth
- W. T. Williams

Mentioned in Despatches

- B. McG. Chrystall