

# THE BE2 SERIES IN AUSTRALIA

by Colin Owers

All photographs via the author unless stated otherwise.

A 1922 MINUTE WHICH DETAILS THE 154 AIRCRAFT then in the possession of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) includes a BE2a biplane.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the numbers of aircraft and the dates of write-offs establishes that the listing refers to the period between March and May 1922.<sup>2</sup> The only BE2 known to have been possessed by the military in Australia after 1918 was a BE2e which was struck off strength on 5 August 1920, when it was transferred to the Australian War Museum (AWM). Why a BE2a biplane was still considered to be 'on strength' by the RAAF at this late date is only one more question still to be answered in the remarkable story of these aircraft in Australian military service.

The BE2 had its origin in the BE1 of 1911. The Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough had no authority to build new aeroplanes, but it was permissible to 'reconstruct' aircraft. This was liberally interpreted so that when a Voisin biplane that had been presented to the British Army by the Duke of Westminster was sent to the Factory for repair; it emerged as the BE1. The 'reconstructed' Voisin bore no relationship to the aircraft which had entered the Factory. Designed by Geoffrey de Havilland and F.M. Green, the BE1 was a neat two-seat tractor biplane.

A second aircraft soon followed designated BE2, as it was the second aeroplane in the BE series. It was very similar to the BE1: however the BE3 and BE4 were quite different from the original BE type. At some time in 1912, the designation came to mean type numbers and not series numbers. The BE2 soon proved itself and was ordered by the War Office. The next model was the BE2a, the change in designation seemingly being applied to cover a revised fuel system.

Australia had decided to form an air arm and the British authorities were asked to select the most suitable aircraft for the training of officers for the proposed AFC. Two BE2a biplanes, together with two 35hp (26kW) Deperdussin

monoplanes, were recommended and subsequently ordered by the Australian High Commission in London on Victorian Order No.923, at about the end of July 1912. This was the first Australian Government order for a military aircraft.

A Bristol Boxkite biplane (or slow school type) was also ordered on the recommendation of expatriate Australian Harry Busteed, who had been selected as one of the aviators to run the new Australian flying school. Busteed did not return to Australia to take up the appointment, his place being taken by Eric Harrison. These five aircraft formed the basis of the Central Flying School (CFS).

Major P.N. Buckley, Royal Australian Engineers, was a military representative at Australia House and, in late 1912 or early 1913, he visited the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company (Bristol) to inspect the Boxkite. Bristol was also constructing the two BE2a biplanes to the Australian order.

Harrison was performing the contract inspections of the Australian order and he reported to Buckley that: *With regard to the two B.E.2 Biplanes, these machines seem to be progressing very slowly; owing to the Bristol Company's inability to procure strainers...before fitting to the machine they have to go to Farnborough for testing purposes. So the Australian B.E.2's are still waiting for strainers...Once these strainers are procured they will I am told be able to turn them out at the rate of one every three weeks.*

The biplanes were further delayed while the tailplanes were replaced by one incorporating modifications made by the Royal Aircraft Factory (RAF). Bristol built at least four batches of BE2a biplanes. These had Works Sequence Numbers 114-117, 140-141, 168-174 & 190-195 and are known to have been issued British serial numbers. It has not proved possible to identify the Sequence Numbers of the Australian biplanes. Bristol built BE2a biplanes were of high quality and this led to orders for more, but the small size of the batches coupled with delays

A BE2a at Point Cook. The tents in background were erected in an area protected by trees, the first military installation there. :FAAM JMB/GSL 01382

