

FORMER RNZAF OPERATIONS ROOM – Wilson Road, Ohakea



Architect: Public Works Department
Construction date: 1943
Visible materials: Reinforced concrete
Architectural style: Military
Use/building type: Military
Date and Compiler: Ian Bowman, 2016; Val Burr 2017
Proposed ranking: B

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Introduction

This old concrete structure in Wilson Road, Ohakea, was built during World War 2, and it serves as a reminder of the fear current within New Zealand at the time it was being planned. Peter Cooke, in his book, *Defending New Zealand: Ramparts on the Sea 1840-1950s*, records that its construction was a sign that the war was felt to be coming closer. This had resulted in the decision by the Royal New Zealand Air Force in February 1942, to build a series of underground operations rooms at 17 air stations. Work was underway on six of them by August 1942, with £195,720 having been sought from the War Cabinet to pay for the work. Cooke lists 21 of these operations rooms of various types and in various locations around the country. However it appears that only five were completed, including the Ohakea one, while the rest were cancelled as the need for them appeared to wane - or in two cases they were started, but were then cancelled prior to completion.¹

¹ Peter Cooke, *Defending New Zealand: Ramparts on the Sea 1840-1950s, Part 2* (Defence of New Zealand Study Group, 2000), pp. 525-527

Centre The structure has been built inside the hole, and awaits being covered up. This is the Ohakea facility, north east of the air base. While not completed or used during the war, this was only covered over in the 1950s. Ohakea and Whenuapai both had large station shelters.



Figure 1 The Ohakea operations room structure prior to being covered over in the late 1950s. (Source: Cooke, p. H-8)

Ohakea Air Base

In his article, 'A Place of Birds: Ohakea Airbase', Paul Gibson outlines the history of the site in terms of its aviation history. He writes that in the 1920s, Ohakea was being considered as a potential mooring site for international commercial airships. However, the R-101 disaster in 1930 ended British airship plans and the site remained as farmland.

With Adolf Hitler's appearance in 1933, New Zealand began reacting to events in Europe, and in 1936 plans began being made to establish the air force as being independent of the army, and to expand it into a credible fighting force. In March 1936, a plane charged with taking photos of potential sites for airfields, sought out the old proposed British Imperial Airship mast site near the Rangitikei River and just south of the Bulls Bridge. With difficulty they identified the correct site amongst all the surrounding paddocks – and this was to be the future Ohakea air base site.²

By June 1937, the Government had made the decision to purchase five farms totalling 486 acres, for the purposes of establishing an air force station at the site. It was expected to take three years to fully develop the site, which was to accommodate some 500 people and to include two large hangars. At time of construction during 1938-39, the two hangars (the subjects of a £105,127 contract) were the largest in the Southern Hemisphere.³

The hangars were intended to accommodate a number of Vickers Wellington bombers which were due to start arriving in October 1939. However, the outbreak of war on 1st September 1939, saw the bombers diverted to usage in Europe. Thus Ohakea became a recruit training depot after the first RNZAF staff arrived there on 12 September 1939, when staffing facilities were still incomplete.

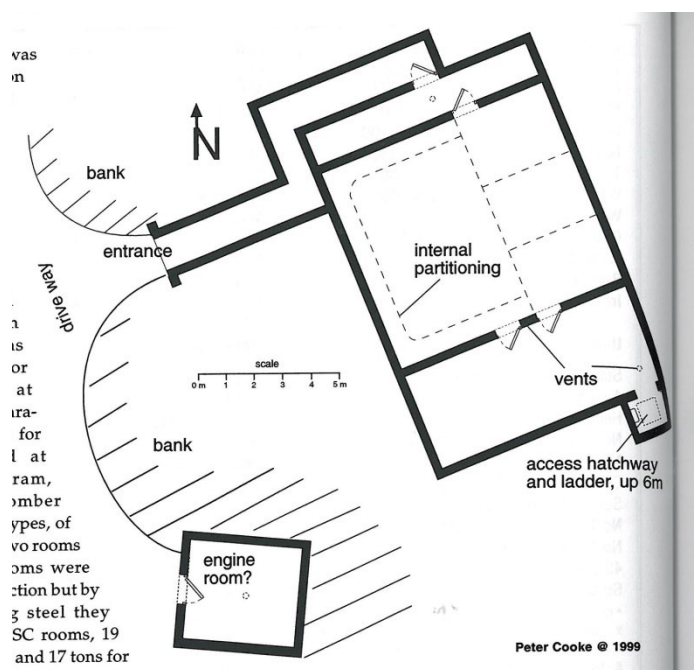
On 25th September 1939, "the first 'official' aeroplane arrived. It was recorded as ZK-AAC, an Avro Avian biplane which had belonged to Dr Oram (sic) of Palmerston North, and was now piloted by Squadron Leader Gibson, Staff Officer-in-Charge of Airfield Construction and the designer of the

² Paul Gibson, 'A Place of Birds: Ohakea Airbase', *The Manawatu Journal of History*, 2006, Issue No. 2, pp. 32-33

³ *NZ Herald*, 15 June 1937, p. 8; *Horowhenua Chronicle*, 17 June 1937, p. 7, 31 March 1938, p. 3; *Evening Post*, 26 July 1938, p. 9

airfield, who had come to liaise with Mr Gilkison.”⁴ This is the ID of M.H. Oram’s Avro Avian that was destroyed at Parorangi Aerodrome in February 1936, and the wrecked remains of which were burnt in Auckland in February 1939.⁵

Japan’s entry into the war in December 1941 created a whole new dynamic for activities at Ohakea, and by early 1942 it was feared that Japanese forces might invade New Zealand. One of the resulting features was the construction of the discrete and somewhat ‘distant from the base’ underground operations room in Wilson Road. However, by early 1943, the threat of invasion had receded, and accordingly the need for concealed operations rooms had also receded.⁶



The Operations Room

The operations room was built by the Public Works Department to become a joint fighter and bomber operations centre for the Ohakea Air Base. New Zealand’s other operation rooms that were completed, were at Waipapakauri (near Kaitaia, the RNZAF’s northernmost base), Whenuapai, Gisborne, and Nelson. Of these, the structures at Whenuapai and Ohakea were termed as being ‘large station shelters’. The rest were planned to be smaller shelters. The intention of these structures was to provide key stations with alternative underground concrete bunker-style operations rooms that would hopefully be able to escape enemy attention during any potential air raids.

Figure 2 This is not a plan of the Ohakea operations room and its associated engine-room, however, the surviving structures doubtless shared the same general layout to this one. (Source: Cooke, p. H-8)

The structures at Waipapakauri, Whenuapai, New Plymouth, Ohakea and Woodbourne, were, or were intended to have been joint fighter and bomber operations centres. These had their main area divided into three rooms. The smaller structures were either to be used in relation to fighter control or bomber control. These underground structures were referred to – along with similar above-ground operations rooms - as ‘raid shelters’ for security reasons.

⁴ Gibson, p. 38

⁵ Please refer to the report on ‘Parorangi Aerodrome’ for Manawatu District Council that accompanies this one. Also: Airhistory.org.uk: ‘Golden Years of Aviation’: http://www.airhistory.org.uk/gv/reg_ZK-.html ; One of ZK-AAC’s former pilots, Flight Lieutenant M.W. Buckley, was one of the two pilots tasked with taking aerial photos to identify a site for the future Ohakea air base on 16 March 1936. (Ref: Gibson, p. 33) ZK-AAC had been wrecked six weeks previously.

⁶ Charles Darby, *RNZAF: The first Decade 1937-46*, (Melbourne, Australia, 1978), p. 7

At the time, reinforcing steel was hard to come by, and different parts of the structures were to receive different quantities of it (based on the significance of the various parts of the structure) as part of the means to protect the various rooms from attack through falling bombs.

Cooke stated (p. 527) that in mid-June 1941 (when Germany was still the main fear), that the RNZAF E & R Committee had met to review the priorities of the various planned structures. Those at Waipapakauri, Whenuapai, New Plymouth, Ohakea, Nelson and Woodbourne were given A1 priority, and their shares of the precious reinforcing steel were on site by June 15th. However, Woodbourne and New Plymouth had their structures cancelled when incomplete, while the rest (other than Gisborne's) were also ultimately cancelled unbuilt. By March 1943, those operations rooms at Waipapakauri, Gisborne and Nelson had been completed, while Ohakea's was following on from them.

Ohakea's operations room cost £8,000 to build, and was sited on Wilson Road so as to be adjacent to the Bulls-Sanson telephone lines. It was planned to be well ventilated (apparently imperfectly), and it was to be supplied with electricity from its own generator 100yds (= about 91 metres) further along the road. The operations room was accessed via a secure door and stairway, and this was the only part that was to be visible above ground level.⁷

Cooke states that: *"The ops rooms built also seem to have suffered problems similar to the Combined Operations Centres (i.e. like Ohakea's), with the ventilation and communications systems proving troublesome."* It is therefore perhaps fortunate that none of the structures were used operationally during the war, other than for storage. The Ohakea Operations Room was in due course covered over with soil in the late 1950s.⁸

While the operations rooms at Whenuapai, Ohakea (both large stations), Waipapakauri, Gisborne and Nelson (all small stations) have survived, it is not known if Gisborne's still exists. It has since been covered over by a mound of earth and is thus not visible.⁹



Figure 3 The Ohakea Operations Room still underground, as photographed by Google Street View in March 2008, before the soil was removed from the top of the concrete room. The soil had been cleared by February 2010 (Google Street View image).

⁷ 'Hunker in the Bunker (Manawatu)': https://www.geocaching.com/geocache/GC4DZMC_hunker-in-the-bunker-manawatu

⁸ Cooke, p. 527

⁹ Cooke, p. H-8

Recent Years

The property was transferred into private ownership in the 1970s and farming activities have continued surrounding the operations room. In March 2008 Google Street View images revealed that the operations room was buried under soil, however, by February 2010, the roof of the room had been cleared of soil.



Figure 4 The small structure that contained the engine that powered the operations room
(Source: Google Street View, November 2013)

Architect

Began in 1870 in response to the rapid growth and development of New Zealand at the time the Public Works Department functions consisted of such things as immigration, railway construction, roads, electric power supply, housing, building controls and unemployment relief. The Public Works Act 1928 brought the Public Works Department (PWD) and the Ministry of Works into a single unit, and at that stage the responsible Minister was known as the Minister of Works, while the head of the department was the Commissioner of Works. The PWD designed most structures required by the armed forces in New Zealand from its inception.

The department was re-named the Ministry of Works and Development in 1973, with the Minister of Works and Development having responsibility for it. The Ministry of Works and Development was abolished in 1988 when it became the Consultancy Division of the State-Owned-Enterprise Works and Development Services Corporation NZ Limited. The Division became a separate subsidiary in 1992 known as Works Consultancy Services Ltd. Works Consultancy Services was sold to Kinta Kellas of Malaysia in November 1996. The Company's name changed to Opus International Consultants Limited in April 1997.



Figure 5 The operations room in relation to Ohakea Air Base. The two original hangars give an indication of how far apart the two centers of activity were during WWII. (Source: Manawatu District Council: <http://maps.mdc.govt.nz/IntraMaps80/default.htm>)

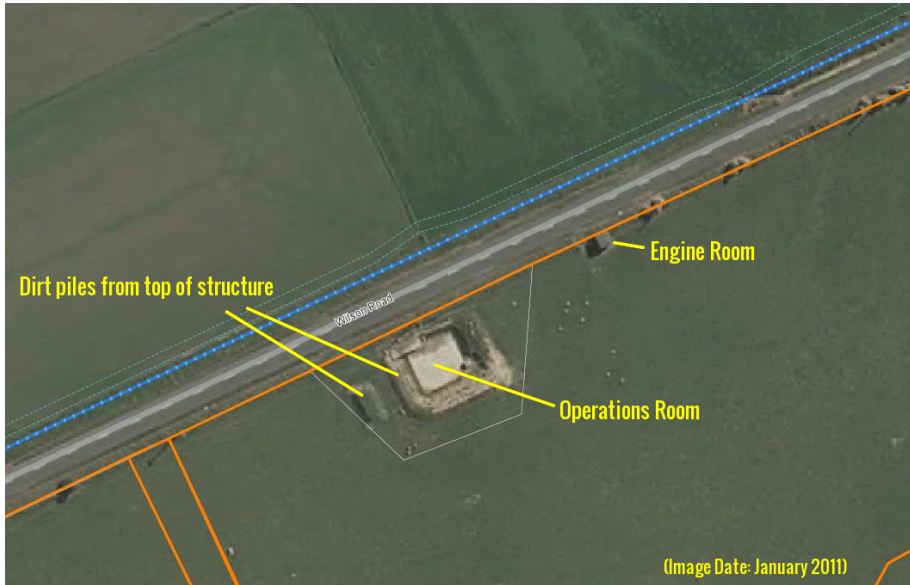


Figure 6 A satellite view of the Operations Room in January 2011 - after its cover of soil had been removed sometime between March 2008 and February 2010. All the mounded soil around it now, was previously over the top of the structure (Source: Manawatu District Council: <http://maps.mdc.govt.nz/IntraMaps80/default.htm>)

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

The reinforced concrete control centre at Ohakea is located on Wilson Road near the corner with State Highway 1. It was built underground and has a rectangular floor plan divided into two rooms and a corridor, at the end of which appears to be a toilet. There is stair access at the north-west corner and ladder access at the south east corner. Cast iron pipes set into the ceiling of the building extend above the roof of the structure to give light into the rooms. The central room still retains some hardboard on batten lining on the ceiling. It is not known if the walls or floor were lined.

A small concrete structure was also built to the north east of the control centre, which has a timber door and low-level wall vents. It was possibly a radio or engine shed¹⁰.

Based on Peter Cooke's research the roof of the structure was designed to withstand medium weight bombs requiring significant reinforcing, which was scarce at the time.

The underground building is located within slightly undulating, grassed farmland in close proximity to Wilson Road. The only other structure in close proximity is the small concrete structure on the road.

RECENT CONSENTS

The site where the Operations Room is located was subject to a subdivision consent in 2016, where three new lots were created on the corner of Wilson Road and State Highway 1. The following consent condition was added as part of granting the subdivision consent:

¹⁰ pers comm Peter Cooke, Ian Bowman 29 November 2016.

“9. That subject to Section 221 of the Resource Management Act 1991 the following consent notice must attach to Lot 3 herein: "That the bomb shelter on Lot 3 must not be modified or destructed."

The following advice note was also included as part of the consent decision:

“The consent holder is advised that the historic RNZAF bunker may be subject to a recommendation to be protected for its heritage values as part of the District Plan Review process.”

REVIEW OF REPORT

Based on a review of the report and viewing of Council files, the assessment undertaken in 2016/2017 for this building is still applicable as at January 2022.

SUMMARY OF HERITAGE VALUES

The structures have **moderate** to **high regional** significance for **architectural, representative, technology, rarity, group, authenticity, group, associative, pattern** and **educational** heritage values.

The structures have **moderate architectural, representative** and **technology** values as examples of standardised plans for WW2 bomber operations centres, designed using very scarce reinforced concrete to withstand medium weight bombs.

The structure has **moderate rarity** and **group** values as one of five such structures still known to exist.

Both buildings appear to have **high authenticity**.

The structures have **high associative** values with the Public Works Department who designed and built them and whose history is of defence design and construction.

The need for the control rooms and associated structures demonstrate the perceived need in WW2 for urgent defences, particularly against the possible invasion of the country by Japan and, consequently, **high pattern** values.

The need for, design and construction of the structures contributes to **high educational** values.

SOURCES

Printed Sources

Cooke, Peter, *Defending New Zealand: Ramparts on the Sea 1840-1950s, Part 2* (Defence of New Zealand Study Group, 2000)

Darby, Charles, *RNZAF: The first Decade 1937-46*, (Melbourne, Australia, 1978)

Gibson, Paul, A Place of Birds: Ohakea Airbase, in *The Manawatu Journal of History*, 2006, Issue No. 2, p. 32-39

Online Sources

Airhistory.org.uk: ‘Golden Years of Aviation’: http://www.airhistory.org.uk/gy/reg_ZK-.html

Google Street View: <https://www.google.co.nz/maps/>

'Hunker in the Bunker (Manawatu)': https://www.geocaching.com/geocache/GC4DZMC_hunker-in-the-bunker-manawatu

Legislation.govt.nz: Land Act 1948:

<http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1948/0064/latest/whole.html>

Papers Past: <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers> (*Evening Post, Horowhenua Chronicle, NZ Herald*) - (as per footnotes and text)

Other Sources

Manawatu District Council: Certificate of Title, online maps