

## UNVEILING OF THE SIR KEITH PARK MEMORIAL, THAMES AIRFIELD

Good morning distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Today is the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Britain and we are here to recognise the achievements of a local hero – Sir Keith Park.

Keith Park was born here in Thames on the 15<sup>th</sup> June 1892; he went on to be educated at Otago Boys High School and Oxford University. Upon completing his education, he served in the cadets and then later joined the NZ Field Artillery as a Territorial soldier fighting in Gallipoli and Egypt.

In July 1915, Keith Park was commissioned as second Lieutenant and then transferred from the NZ Army to the British Army, joining the Royal Horse and Field Artillery. Whilst serving in Gallipoli, then on the Somme, Keith Park was wounded and classed as unfit to ride a horse. He joined the Royal Flying Corps and after flight training and accumulating 100 flight hours, he joined the 48 Squadron in July 1917. By the end of the year, the Bristol fighter pilot had scored 20 victories, despite being shot down once by anti-aircraft fire and later by a German Ace fighter pilot. His achievements were rewarded with the Military Cross and Bar, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the French Croix de Guerre.

Keith Park remained with the RAF even after the First World War and rose through the ranks to become Air vice Marshall. He was even chosen to be one of King George VI's four aides-de-camp, riding behind the King in his Coronation procession in 1937.

Prior to World War Two Keith Park was appointed senior staff officer to Hugh Dowding. Dowding appointed him Commander-in-Chief of the most important 11 Group. They were assigned to defend the southern coastline of Britain and southeast England, but protect London, which would be an obvious target for the Luftwaffe at some stage during the war. In 1940, the Luftwaffe attacked London and it was Park's leadership, judgement and exemplary co-ordination skills that led to Hitler's attack being repelled. Sir Winston Churchill was to memorably proclaim, "Never in the history of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few".

World War Two saw Keith Park in charge of organising air-protection for the Allied evacuation of Dunkirk when they had become cornered by advancing German forces. In 1942, he was charged with defending Malta. By now, he was Air Marshal Park, under his command fighters were sent out to intercept the German attack, and Malta was saved. After Malta, he was promoted to the post of Allied Air Commander-in-Chief, of South East Asia, where he served until the end of the war.

At the end of the 1940's Park retired and was promoted to Air Chief Marshal. Park returned to NZ in 1948 retiring and taking a role in the Auckland City Council. He died on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1975.

Lord Tedder – the Chief of the Royal Air Force – best summed up Park's achievements in a quote – "If any one man won the Battle of Britain, he did. I do not believe it is realised how much that one man, with his leadership, his calm judgement and his skill, did to save, not only this country, but the world".

I would like to also pay tribute to Mr Terry Smith, of the Sir Keith Park Memorial Campaign, whose dedication and tenacity have resulted in the establishment of a permanent memorial to Sir Keith in London. Whilst they will very soon unveil the tremendous bronze sculpture created by Weta, we too mark this auspicious occasion in our own 'Coromandel' way.

In memory of this most remarkable local hero I would therefore like to rename the Thames Airfield, Sir Keith Park (Memorial) Thames Airfield, and proudly unveil our own tribute.

Philippa Barriball  
Mayor, 15.09.2010