

New Zealand Defence Force Tomorrow's Workforce

By running hands-on tech and aviation camps for female secondary school students, the Royal New Zealand Air Force is aiming to get more women working in aviation.

The School to Skies (S2S) programme is designed to help the Royal New Zealand Air Force reach its target of 25 per cent female representation by 2025 and expose young Kiwi women to new career opportunities.

The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) has almost 15,000 staff, comprised of military and non-military personnel working across the Navy, Air Force, and Army services. Only 22 per cent of those are female.



S2S Programme Manager Squadron Leader George Magdalinos says the RNZAF knows that to achieve its core outputs, it needs to attract and retain the best talent. "That can only be achieved if we maximise the pool of applicants."

The S2S camps run for four or five days and give a group of Year 12 and 13 students the opportunity to experience life on an Air Force Base and showcase five primary trade groups: pilot, engineer, air warfare officer, aircraft technician and avionics technician.

"We subscribe to the theory you can't be what you can't see," George says.

Half of the time at the camp is dedicated to science, technology, engineering, maths and aviation activities; the rest of the time is spent on personal and professional development, including leadership and resilience activities.

The students get the chance to fly a flight simulator, build a plane, and plan and execute a search and rescue mission in a military aircraft.

The S2S initiative was developed by three RNZAF staff members, based on research and experience garnered in 10 years of supporting the Defence Recruiting Organisation, in partnership with external specialist organisations. The RNZAF plans to run camps twice a year, with up to 40 instructors involved in planning and executing the programme.

NZDF leadership support S2S by dedicating resources and making the camps a priority for the hosting base, and the Chief of Air Force has visited the programme and interacted with the young women. Each director or branch head has visited S2S and the Navy is looking at setting up a similar programme, School to Seas.

Following the S2S programme, 67 per cent of year 13 participants (those eligible to apply for the RNZAF) engaged with the recruitment organisation. Two have accepted offers of service, two recently passed the selection board for engineering and aircrew roles and one has accepted an offer to join the Navy.

Another, a highly capable young Māori woman from a disadvantaged background, didn't meet the minimum education criteria for her chosen trade prior to attending S2S. She returned to school in 2018

to attain the science credits required to train as an aircraft technician and has recently submitted her RNZAF application.

“The RNZAF benefits every time a female applies to join our ranks because we will better reflect and represent the New Zealanders that we protect and serve,” says Squadron Leader Sarah Collins. For the students, S2S provides a unique opportunity for experiential learning.



“The camp broadened my horizons and has made a real change to the way I look at my education. The new friendships I have made have been outstanding! Finding other people who are interested in the same thing as me, and who have set plans in place to achieve their future aspirations, has helped me set my own goals in place to involve myself with aviation in the near future.” Strider Palmer, September 2017.

“Thank you to all those who showed me what life could be like in uniform and most of all for inviting me to your home and allowing me to make it a part of who I am as a Pacific Islander.” Polataia Toti, September 2017.

The course also benefits the staff involved in delivering the camps, says Sarah Collins. “These individuals have become the teachers and the spokespeople for diversity, and its benefits, in their own units. We have noted that as more S2S programmes have been held, and more instructional staff support the event, the job of influencing diversity on the shop floor has become less and less of a challenge for Commanders.

“This is especially powerful when the message has come from our male service personnel.”

Social media and television coverage of the initiative is also helping improve the reputation of the RNZAF, she says.

“The RNZAF has been able to demonstrate our commitment to gender diversity by showing that we understand the need for more women in our workplace and we are prepared to do something about it.”

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