

Rathmines Air Base

Beginnings

There are a number of sites in the Rathmines area, some within the Rathmines Park vicinity, providing links to the traditional inhabitants, known as the Awabakal Nation. The first recorded white settler was Irishman Edward Norton Hely, who in 1840 named his small plot, which he farmed into orchards and vineyards and raised a few cattle, after his small hometown village near Dublin. The official grant however was given to his son Edward William Hely in 1882. The early 1900s saw the area become a popular picnic spot and a destination for holiday makers. In the mid 1930s, the RAAF began searching for a suitable site to house a Flying Boat Base and Pilot Training School. After a number of investigations and surveys were completed, Rathmines was chosen, and in 1939, the nucleus of the new base was formed with the arrival of a party of four officers, with Wing Commander J. E. Hewitt at the helm, and twenty-eight airmen from the No. 5 Squadron from RAAF Richmond. They were renamed the No. 9 (Fleet Cooperation) Squadron.

Development

The site comprised eighty acres (around 32 hectares) and clearing began. A camp was quickly set up as the declaration of war in Europe, in September 1939, gave urgency to become operational. Local cottages and two halls were rented to house the small contingent temporarily. In the original design of the base, all buildings were to be brick, but with impending war, semi-permanent wooden framed structures covered with tin were erected as an alternative. It was fondly known in the area as 'Tin City'. By the end of January 1940, the base was fully operational.

Function

The basic function of the base was for the:

- Conversion and training of air crews to flying boats
- Training of sea rescue crews
- Service and maintenance of flying boats and sea planes
- Supplying of Seagull and Walrus aircrafts for the Australian Navy
- Patrolling of the New South Wales Coast by Catalina and Sikorsky aircraft, on the alert for enemy submarines and raiders

Units

The following units were based at RAAF Rathmines at various times:

- No. 9 Squadron (formerly the No 5 Squadron)
- No. 10 Squadron (General Reconnaissance)
- No. 11 Squadron
- No. 20 Squadron
- No. 40 Squadron
- No. 41 Squadron
- No. 43 Squadron
- No. 107 Squadron
- No. 2 Flying Boat Repair
- No. 3 Operational Training Unit
- Seaplane Training Flight
- Search and Rescue Wing

Aircraft

During its lifespan, the RAAF base at Rathmines hosted, converted and serviced a number of aircraft. At various stages during World War II, Rathmines housed Nos. 9 (Walrus), 11, 20 and 43 (Catalina), 40 (Sunderland and Martin Mariner), 41 (Dornier Do 24K, Mariner and S23 Empire) and 107 (Kingfisher) Squadrons. In 1939, new aircraft, Sunderland flying boats, were in the process of being delivered to the base from England, but with the advent of war, the government was forced to abandon delivery. The squadron remained in England and fought alongside the RAF in coastal command.

World War II

Rathmines Air Base was an important centre for the Catalina seaplanes, which played a pivotal role in Australia's defensive operations during the war. From 1942 they roamed the western Pacific region in covert night operations laying mines in enemy harbours and uncovering Japanese naval vessels by radar. The Catalina possessed an extensive range which enabled the crew to call in the navy while still maintaining contact with Japanese forces. American and Australian naval forces were then able to intercept and defeat the Japanese, driving them from Australian waters and subsequently thwarting attacks on mainland Australia.

The longest operation flown from Australia was the mining of Manila Harbour in December 1944. A secret mission, it involved aircraft from Squadrons 11, 42 and 43 and which left from Melville Bay in the Northern Territory. Six Catalinas from the 11 Squadron in Rathmines flew to Darwin where they were joined by a further twelve Catalinas to mine Manila Harbour. The round trip of approximately 3,300 kilometres took roughly 80 hours and was done so in stages.

Catalinas were also responsible for recovery operations. Allied survivors from ships and aircraft drifting in dinghies and boats were retrieved and brought to safety.

Amongst Australian wartime heroes the following men served at Rathmines:

- Group Captain Athol (Attie) Wearne DSO DFC
- Air Commodore W. Keith Bolitho DFC DFS (US)
- Wing Commander Dick Atkinson DSO DFC
- Wing Commander Gordon Stilling DFC
- Squadron Leader Lin Hurt DFC
- Wing Commander G. U. 'Scottie' Allan
- Sir Richard Kingsland (Dick Cohen)

WAAAF

March 1941 the Women's Auxiliary Australia Air Force (WAAAF) came into existence after extensive lobbying by women keen to serve and by the Chief of the Air Staff. This was largely due to men drawn away from their industry positions and called into active service. Women were trained in their duties, although they were paid less than their male counterparts. The WAAAF was the largest women's services in World War II. Rathmines boasted a great camaraderie and was highly sought after as a posting.

Women were employed in 73 musterings (trades) at the base, including highly skilled technical work on aircraft. Some of these musterings were:

- telegraphists

- armament workers
- electricians
- fitters
- flight mechanics
- fabric workers
- instrument makers
- meteorological assistants
- clerical
- medical
- transport
- catering
- equipment
- signals and radar fields of employment

This demonstrated that women were more than capable of performing and fulfilling tasks and roles that had previously been undertaken solely by men. They were not permitted to serve outside of Australia other than several official visits made by a few to New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Northern Territory. The names of the 57 WAAAFs who died while serving their country are listed at the Australian War Museum in Canberra.

After the War

Shortly after the war, both the No. 3 Operational Unit and No. 2 Flying Boat Repair Depot had been disbanded and the base renamed 'Search and Rescue Wing', with personnel from 112 and 114 Air Sea Rescue and the RAAF Station Port Moresby sent to Rathmines. It was renamed again in 1948 to No. 11 (GR) Squadron, and finally resumed the title of RAAF Station Rathmines in 1950. The base continued its service by operating as a ground-training base and an Officers' Training School from 12 April 1950. The Catalina aircraft were phased out, and from the mid to late 1950's Rathmines RAAF Base continued to be staffed by RAAF personnel, Senior non-commissioned officers, physical training officers and national servicemen and used as a National Service training base. Training was provided to Airframe Fitters, Engine Fitters and general service personnel. They had one operational Aeroplane, the Commanding Officer's Auster, which was flown from an airstrip, built through the bush on the promontory. There were also workboats at the wharf, from the days of the flying boats. Captain PG Taylor's Catalina, in which he pioneered the direct crossing to South America, was still in storage there, prior to being transferred to the Powerhouse Museum, in Sydney.

Following the purchase of the land by Lake Macquarie Council in 1962, many of the buildings were sold and removed from the site. Some were used by the council as community halls. The large hangar was pulled down and shipped to RAAF Base Richmond to accommodate their new Hercules Aircraft.

In 2005, the former Rathmines Air Base was heritage listed by the New South Wales State Government and an application has been put to the Federal Government for similar acknowledgment. The Rathmines' Catalina Festival was formed in 2008 to raise money to buy a Catalina for display for a museum proposed on the site. The festival is held yearly in October, where the Rathmines Catalina Memorial Park Association displays artefacts and memorabilia. A Catalina was purchased in 2013 from Puerto Rico, which will feature once the museum is operational. The popular event is exclusive to the region and is the largest community festival held in the Lake Macquarie area.

Memorials

The Rathmines Memorial Bowling Club occupies one of the remaining original buildings on the base. In 1982, a suggestion was made to construct a wall within the club commemorating and honouring RAAF personnel who operated and trained at the base during its service years. In 1983, a submission was made to all State Branches and the National Committee, all supported the proposal. The wall was officially dedicated on 19 September 1984.

The Catalina Memorial is erected on land donated by Lake Macquarie City Council, now known as Catalina Park. The walk along a paved, landscaped path leads to a monolithic structure with a Catalina propeller featured on top. Walls either side are inscribed with those who died or served for their country and had passed through the base at Rathmines.

Source: <https://history.lakemac.com.au/page-local-history.aspx?pid=1085&vid=20&tmpt=narrative&narid=3610>

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