



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

The ordered arrangement of the remaining buildings at *Cunderdin Airfield* demonstrates the spartan character of a RAAF flying training base expeditiously constructed to meet the needs of the war effort. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Cunderdin Airfield was the only elementary (basic) flying training facility established in Western Australia during World War Two. (Criterion 2.1)

For five years *Cunderdin Airfield* had a continuous association with the theatres of World War Two, in Europe and the Pacific. (Criterion 2.2)

After the war, *Cunderdin Airfield* was utilised as a migrant camp, and has an association with the development of Australia's multi-cultural society. (Criterion 2.2)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Cunderdin Airfield is highly valued by the membership of the Royal Australian Air Force Association many of whom did their basic training there, or were involved with units operating from Cunderdin during World War Two. (Criterion 4.1)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

Cunderdin Airfield was the only elementary (basic) flying training facility established in Western Australia during World War Two. The remaining elements, including runway, apron, a group of ten, largely unaltered, wartime 'tarmac' buildings *in situ* and a wartime Bellman hangar, provide rare evidence of a wartime RAAF base. (Criterion 5.1)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Cunderdin Airfield is characteristic of wartime facilities that were designed to be functional and to be erected quickly and simply. (Criterion 6.1)

The Bellman hangar (Building 108), a structure that could be easily dismantled and relocated in a new location in response to changes in defence strategies, is a good example of RAAF requirements during the early years of World War Two. (Criterion 6.1)

12.3 CONDITION

The buildings at *Cunderdin Airfield* are generally in sound condition. The exceptions are Buildings 106 and 109 which are in poor condition.

12.4 INTEGRITY

Although *Cunderdin Airfield* is no longer a military base, its current use as a civilian airfield and headquarters of a gliding club is compatible with its original function. *Cunderdin Airfield* has a high level of integrity.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

The remaining wartime buildings are largely unaltered and still demonstrate the character of a wartime base. *Cunderdin Airfield* retains a high level of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary and physical evidence has been compiled from the National Trust of Australia (WA) Assessment Form completed by Lindsay Peet, Historian. Additional physical evidence has been compiled from brief site reports by HCWA staff.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Following the outbreak of World War Two in Europe in September 1939, Great Britain made an appeal to its colonies and Dominions for the training of aircrew (pilots, observers, wireless air gunners) to serve with the Royal Air Force. Consequently, in 1940, the Empire Air Training Scheme was established. The actual pilot training was carried out by two kinds of schools, one basic, the other advanced. Two schools were established in Western Australia: No. 9 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) at Cunderdin to handle basic flying training utilising Tiger Moths and No. 4 Service Flying Training School at Geraldton to handle advanced twin-engined flying training to 'wings' standard utilising Ansons.¹

Plans for the various EFTSs were finalised about June 1940. The site for No. 9 EFTS seems to have been selected at Cunderdin about that time. Contracts for 47 'permanent' and 20 temporary buildings at Cunderdin were let in October 1940. Most were not finished until well into 1941; however, flying training at Cunderdin began very early that year. The cost, at May 1941, of the 47 buildings (Contract "A") was £27,672-0-0 and for the 20 temporary buildings (Contract "B") was £15,423-15-0.²

¹ Research by historian Lindsay Peet at Australian Archives (WA Office), Australian War Memorial (Canberra), Public Record Office of WA (formerly State Archives of WA) and RAAF Historical & Information Service (Canberra).

² *ibid.*

By May 1942, seven EFTSs had been established throughout Australia, six in the eastern states and the one at Cunderdin in Western Australia. After the Japanese entered the war in December 1941, Australia ceased to be a colonial backwater. During 1942, many RAAF airfields and bases in southern Australia were used for direct war purposes; Cunderdin was no exception.³

In March 1942, a number of P-40 Kittyhawk fighter aircraft essential for the RAAF's first air defences of Perth were assembled at Cunderdin.⁴ Between March and June 1942, two LB-30 Liberator heavy bombers of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) 28th Bombardment Squadron (from the 19th Bombardment Group) were based at Cunderdin and carried out long-range ocean patrols in the defence of southern Western Australia.⁵ During the Japanese fleet scare of March 1944⁶, when there were fears of a carrier attack on Fremantle and Perth, Cunderdin played an important role. Had such an attack eventuated, *Cunderdin Airfield* was to have been the temporary base for the USAAF's 380th Bombardment Group's B-24 Liberators from the Northern Territory which would have then attacked the Japanese warships. In anticipation of this the Australian Army rushed bombs and supplies to Cunderdin.⁷

Flying training continued at Cunderdin until early December 1944 when it ceased because the RAAF had a surplus of pilots. Nevertheless, No. 9 EFTS retained all training aircraft on a care and maintenance basis in case the war took an unexpected turn and more pilots were required to be trained. A brief description of flying training at Cunderdin in 1941 is given in Gaston, Horner & Storer⁸, and a personal account of a trainee pilot's experiences at Cunderdin in 1942 is given by Scotland.⁹

In January 1945, No. 25 (City of Perth) Squadron, which was based at RAAF Station Pearce, was re-equipped with B-24 Liberators.¹⁰ In early February, this squadron moved to Cunderdin and almost immediately commenced flying long-range missions over the Indian Ocean searching for survivors from the American motor vessel *Peter Sylvester* which had been torpedoed west of Fremantle by a German U Boat.¹¹ On 14 February, one of the Liberators crashed on take-off at Cunderdin on one of these search and rescue missions and five crew were killed.

No. 25 Squadron operated under the Air Officer Commanding Western Area and was independent from the other RAAF Liberator Wings in the South-west Pacific Area. In March, it staged some of its Liberators to the northern WA advanced operational airbase of Truscott where they flew their first

³ ibid.

⁴ Rorrison, James D. *Nor the Years Condemn: Air War on the Australian Front 1941-42* (Palomar Publications, Brisbane?, 1992) p.307.

⁵ Mitchell, John H. *On Wings We Conquer* (G.E.M. Publishers, Springfield, Missouri, USA, 1990) pp.27, 114; Rorrison 1992, pp.307, 323.

⁶ Odgers, George *Air War Against Japan 1943-1945, Australia in the War of 1939-1945* (Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT, 1957) pp.134-139.

⁷ ibid p.136.

⁸ Gaston, Bruce, Horner, Harry and Storer, Raymond (eds) *Aircrew for the Duration WWII* (WordsWork Express, Welshpool, WA, 1990) pp.12-13.

⁹ Scotland, Tom *Voice From the Stars: A Pathfinder's Story* 2nd edn (T. & L. Scotland, Cannington, WA, 1991) pp.32-40.

¹⁰ Nelmes, Michael *Tocumwal to Tarakan: Australians and the Consolidated B-24 Liberator Bomber* (Banner Books, Belconnen, ACT, 1994) p.125.

¹¹ Nelmes 1994, p.126; Odgers 1957, p.352.

strikes against the Japanese.¹² Over the succeeding five months, No. 25 Squadron Liberators were to stage northwards to the advanced operational bases at Corunna Downs and Learmonth (both in WA) on five more occasions. From these bases they flew 65 sorties against enemy targets in the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia).¹³ In particular, they played a very important part in diverting Japanese attention away from the several Australian landings in Borneo by their raids against Java and Bali. Their last strike against the Netherlands East Indies was only 10 days before the Japanese surrender. Ten Cunderdin-based Liberators made a formation flight over Perth as part of the Victory in the Pacific celebrations on 16 August 1945.

In the immediate post-war months, No. 25 Squadron B-24s from Cunderdin flew as far afield as Borneo and Mototai (Halmaheras) and evacuated Australian Prisoners of War.¹⁴ No. 25 Squadron remained at Cunderdin until about July 1946 when it was disbanded.¹⁵

In June 1945, No. 86 Operational Base Unit took over the running of the RAAF base at Cunderdin from No. 9 EFTS. After No. 25 Squadron ceased flying operations in April 1946, its functions were taken over by Cunderdin Care & Maintenance Unit (RAAF) which operated until May 1947 when the RAAF's Western Area Headquarters employed four civilian Watchmen/caretakers at Cunderdin. It is noted that, as late as November 1947, the RAAF considered Cunderdin to be a strategic airfield (along with Truscott and Learmonth) and proposed spending £30,940 on its airfield maintenance and drainage.

The former RAAF base at Cunderdin was used as a migrant camp (Cunderdin Migrant Centre) from 1949 to 1952, with a capacity of 700 persons. Research has not yet been carried out to disclose the function of the tarmac group of buildings as part of this Migrant Centre, although there are some grounds to believe that they were used for social activities.¹⁶

At some stage during the immediate post-war years (apparently during 1949) the whole of *Cunderdin Airfield* passed from RAAF (Department of Defence) control to the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA), three of the Bellman hangars being removed. From about 1956, individual glider owners leased parts of the tarmac buildings from DCA. Recollections from visits to *Cunderdin Airfield* in 1957 are that there were two huts and a control tower on the airfield side of the remaining Bellman hangar.¹⁷ Of this group, only one hut (Building 101) remained by about 1960. The Gliding Club of Western Australia (GCWA) moved from Caversham to Cunderdin about September 1958 and leased Buildings 101 and 104. Cunderdin was attractive to the GCWA as it was suitable for training of *ab initio* glider pilots, was away from the air traffic routes near Perth, and was centred in an area which was eminently suitable for cross-country soaring, and for various gliding competitions.

¹² Nelmes 1994, p.126; Odgers 1957, p.404; Purser, Frank *The Story of Corunna Downs: WA's Secret Wartime Air Base* (Royal Australian Air Force Association Aviation Museum, Bull Creek, WA, 1987) p.8.

¹³ Nelmes 1994, pp.127-8; Odgers 1957, p.455; Purser 1987, pp.10-12.

¹⁴ Nelmes 1994, p.143.

¹⁵ Nelmes 1994, p.144.

¹⁶ Personal observations in 1957 by Lindsay Peet, Historian.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

About 1962, the Commonwealth Government carried out a disposal of the wartime buildings at *Cunderdin Airfield*. The GCWA and various private lessees protested against the disposal of tarmac buildings and the remaining Bellman hangar resulting in the group of buildings comprising this assessment being excluded from that disposal. Buildings disposed of at that time were principally the Main Camp buildings further to the east where the Agricultural School is now located. During the 1960s, Building 114 was leased by agricultural aviation operators, Fox and Couper, and on several occasions during the 1960s to the 1980s it was also used as the headquarters of commercial power flying training schools. In the 1970s and 1980s, various private glider owners leased other buildings, namely Buildings 110, 111, 112 and 113. Two buildings were purchased, presumably from DCA, namely Buildings 1 (post-war it was the DCA caretaker's house) and 109. The remaining Bellman hangar was shared by all aircraft operators until the GCWA constructed its own hangar in the late 1960s on the site of one of the former Bellman hangars to the north. Subsequently, another operator constructed a hangar on another former Bellman hangar site further south. This is now occupied by the GCWA.

After the building disposal in the early 1960s, much of the original RAAF base at Cunderdin was transferred to the Western Australian Government for use as an agricultural school. In 1992, the runways, the tarmac area, and the area immediately to the east of the Bellman hangar were transferred to the Shire of Cunderdin. However, the Department of Defence retained ownership of the Bellman hangar, leasing it to the Shire of Cunderdin. It was placed under the control of No. 306 Facilities Services Flight at RAAF Base Pearce for some years, then in 1996, sold to the Shire of Cunderdin.¹⁸

In February 1996, plans to develop *Cunderdin Airfield* as a commercial flying school were announced.¹⁹ The proposed development was to involve demolition of some of the remaining buildings; however this proposal has not proceeded.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

This assessment covers a group of 11 buildings located on or near the tarmac area on the eastern side of *Cunderdin Airfield*. It also covers the streetscape created by them as well as assessing them individually. The group consists of a Bellman hangar (Building 108), seven huts related to flying operations or to flying training (Buildings 101, 104, 110, 111, 112, 113 and 114), and three ancillary buildings (Buildings 1, 106 and 109). Because they are closely grouped near the dominant feature, the Bellman hangar, they form a streetscape which is reminiscent of the scene during World War Two.

Bellman hangar (Building 108): This type of hangar is classed as a transportable hangar²⁰, is of English design and was a common hangar at RAAF airfields throughout Australia during World War Two. It has a steel frame with metal sheet cladding. On its roof is a small tower and platform which probably held the airfield's Pundit Beacon (a flashing light to guide aircraft to the airfield at night-time).²¹ This hangar is in reasonable condition, and is structurally sound although some of the external cladding needs

¹⁸ Telephone conversation 19 September 1996 Ian Elliot HCWA with Squadron Leader Mark Borhill of 306 Facilities Services Flight, RAAF Base Pearce.

¹⁹ *West Australian* 15 February 1996 p.26.

²⁰ Robertson, Bruce *Aviation Archaeology*, (Patrick Stephens, Cambridge, UK, 1983) 2nd edn p. 46.

²¹ *RAAF Aerodrome Guide* January 1946 edn p.B4.

attention. It is likely to have had post-war internal modifications. It is the only remaining one of the four Bellman hangars erected at Cunderdin during 1940-41 from stocks of such hangars held by the RAAF. (A similar hangar was still *in situ* at the 'old' Kalgoorlie airfield in May 1993.) The estimated cost (erection only) of all four was £1,280.

Seven huts (Buildings 101, 104, 110, 111, 112, 113 and 114): In general these can be described as timber frame huts on timber stump footings, with sides clad in jarrah weatherboards (lower half) and asbestos cement sheeting (upper half), timber frame windows and doors and corrugated asbestos cement roofing. They are based on standard RAAF plans, of which there appear to be at least six separate types. Each hut was divided internally into offices, classrooms, and other areas to suit their designated functions. Most of the wartime layouts have been preserved, although in some instances (eg Buildings 101, 104 and 110) there are some post-war internal doorways, partitions or fitouts, none of which appear to have significantly altered the original wartime internal layouts. Internally, the buildings were variously lined with Masonite, plasterboard or Sisalkraft. Some of the huts that originally had Sisalkraft backing have had this replaced. The huts were variously ceiled with plasterboard or Sisalkraft; again those with the latter have had their wartime Sisalkraft ceilings replaced.

More particularly, Building 101, originally the Squadron Office, Workshop and Battery Room, is now GCWA's Lounge Hut. Constructed in 1940-41 at an estimated cost of £795, this building is a combination of RAAF plans 39/40/278 and 39/40/489.

Building 104, originally housing the Morse, Wireless and Link Trainer, is now GCWA's Kitchen and No. 1 Workshop. Constructed in 1940-41 at an estimated cost of £727, this building is a combination of RAAF plans 39/40/271 and 39/40/373. Modifications to the interior include accommodation infill at the north end, the removal of the training room platform, and the addition of kitchen facilities, a storeroom and a garage. The condition of the building is fair, except for the ceilings.

Building 110, originally housing Flying Equipment, is now used as private quarters. It was constructed in 1940-41 at an estimated cost of £460 to RAAF Plan 39/40/274. The interior has been largely modified for accommodation. While the external condition is fair, the internal condition is poor.

Building 111, originally the Parachute Hut, is now used as private quarters. It was constructed in 1940-41 at an estimated cost of £716 to RAAF Plan 39/40/281 with parachute drying flues detailed on RAAF Plan 39/40/118. The building has two parachute drying towers, one of which still has its internal fittings.

Building 112, which appears to have been a classroom or associated with flying training or operations in some way, is now used as private quarters. It has asbestos ventilators and was probably constructed in 1942-43.²²

Building 113, which also appears to have been a classroom of some kind, is now used as private quarters and houses an auxiliary power unit at its northern end. It too was probably constructed in 1942-43. Some original ceiling vents remain and the building is in fair to good condition.

Building 114, the Equipment Store (also known as the 'General Store'), was constructed in 1940-41 at an estimated cost of £1,580 to RAAF Plan 40/41/22.

²² Neither this, nor Building 113 are shown on RAAF Drawing 41/42/528 of c.23 September 1941, leading to the conclusion that they were constructed at a later period.

It has been modified internally but still retains its original appearance on the west, north and east facades.

All seven huts represent activities closely associated with flying operations or with flying training, rather than with accommodation or camp administration. Except for Buildings 110 and 114, all have been well maintained externally, although their present colour schemes may not be the same as during wartime. They all appear to be structurally sound, probably because most were built according to 1940 standards rather than the lower standards from 1942.

Three ancillary buildings (Buildings 1, 106 and 109): These are ancillary to the function of the above eight 'flying' buildings.

Building 1, originally the Guards' Sleeping Hut constructed in 1940-41, is believed to have been the post-war DCA caretaker's house. It is in reasonable condition.

Building 106, the original Power House, was constructed in 1940-41 at an estimated cost of £600. This building is in very poor condition.

Building 109, originally the Motor Transport Garage and Office, this is now the GCWA No. 2 Workshop. This building is in poor condition. All cladding needs replacement.

The north-south road between the Bellman hangar and Buildings 111, 112 and 104, and the east-west road between buildings 114, 1 and 109 maintain the streetscapes characteristic of a RAAF World War Two flying training base.

13.3 REFERENCES

National Trust of Australia (WA) Assessment Form.