

Author's Introduction to 1995 Edition¹

Driving along the Murray Valley Highway, its route paralleling the course of Australia's greatest river, you pass through the small north-western Victorian township of Lake Boga, ten miles from Swan Hill.

To the north of the town, a high rusting barbed wire fence still stands, surrounding an area of stunted Yanga salt bush among which a windowless concrete blockhouse sits silently with its faded shades of khaki camouflage.²

'What was there, Dad?' asks an enquiring child, as a family drives past. 'Oh er ... they er ... used to fix flying boats during the war' is often the reply.

Quite correct. RAAF personnel did repair and maintain Allied flying boats at this site during WWII, for this is the site of No. 1 Flying Boat Repair Depot (No. 1 FBRD), Lake Boga.

I have always had an interest in the tales of 'the Air Force at Boga during the war'. In March 1942, as an eleven-year-old, I witnessed the arrival of the first flying boat to alight on Lake Boga, and in May of that year was intrigued by a double page diagram of a Catalina flying boat published in *Flight* magazine. As I pasted the diagram in my aircraft scrap book, I was not to know just how many Catalinas and other flying boats would fly into the district during WWII. In 1944, I was allowed to inspect this still secret facility and in 1946, together with young friends, I crawled through the stilled, stored aircraft to my heart's content.

During the war years, several RAAF personnel became family friends and while working on this volume I managed to trace the NEI Catalina flight engineer who taught me to count in Dutch during his 1943 stopovers.

Five fulfilling years have now passed researching many aspects surrounding No. 1 FBRD which I have chronicled as accurately and comprehensively as possible.

At the time of the Japanese entry into WWII in December 1941, Lake Boga and the adjacent town of Swan Hill had populations of 220 and 4,800 respectively. The region known as the Mallee was and remains primarily, a grain and wool producing area, with its irrigation supporting dairying, animal breeding, and vegetable and fruit production, much of the latter having been developed by solidier settlers after WWI.

These two towns, among others servicing this rural region, suddenly found themselves host to nigh on 1,000 RAAF and WAAAF personnel, plus visiting aircrew from the RAAF, USN, USAAF and the Dutch naval air service.

The central thread, around which this story is woven, is based on information extracted from the Operations Record Books of No. 1 FBRD during 1942-1947. These records are those that formed the depot's daily diary, signed by one temporary and eight permanent commanding officers.

For the sake of this narrative, it is fortunate that in most instances the life of an aircraft is more completely documented than that of a human being. Aeroplanes have a birth and death certificate, plus lifelong certificates of airworthiness. These particulars, when married to information extracted from aircrew flight logs, produce a vivid image of what actually occurred, where it occurred, and when.

This then is a story backgrounded by contemporary worldwide events at a time when many farmers still used horses as a primary power and transport source. It is an account of the life of No. 1 FBRD, its personnel, its visiting aircrew and aircraft, and its adjacent communities: an account of Australia, Swan Hill and ... Lake Boga at War!

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Swan Hill

¹ This is an edited version of the original.

² Today the location is the home of the Lake Boga Flying Boat Museum, which opened in 2012. Among the exhibits is the beautifully restored Catalina A24-30.