

## INTRODUCTION

From the foundation of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in 1921 until the start of the Second World War in September 1939 there was no permanent RAAF presence in South Australia. There were occasional visits by RAAF aircraft; for example, 12 Hawker Demon fighters from No. 1 Squadron at Laverton, Victoria, attended the Centenary Air Pageant at Parafield in December 1936.

Just prior to WWII, expansion plans for the RAAF were the harbinger of increased activity in South Australia. A new air force station at Pearce in Western Australia opened in February 1939 and this was followed the next year by RAAF Darwin. Such locations saw increased transit activity by RAAF aircraft from the eastern states through South Australia, a trend which would continue during the war years.

In 1938, the RAAF looked at South Australian sites for a new flying school. Their preferred location was Smithfield, just to the north of the Parafield civil aerodrome, and, ironically, not far from present day RAAF Edinburgh. It was also noted that areas of coastline near Port Wakefield and Port Pirie were ideal locations for armament training and, as will be seen in 1941, a large bombing and gunnery range was setup adjacent to a new RAAF station at Port Pirie.

In fact, only three months after the outbreak of WWII, the first RAAF presence arrived in the form of a training school established at Parafield. At this time Mount Gambier was also being used regularly by RAAF aircraft from Victoria and, in the final months of 1939, plans were being drawn up for construction of a new RAAF base there.

However, these plans for organic growth of the RAAF were modest compared to the tempest of activity associated with the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS). The EATS was a brilliant piece of long-term strategic planning central to the British ability to wage war against Germany. Through the EATS, Australia agreed to supply Britain with thousands of trained aircrew each year. Following the signing of the agreement in December 1939, the RAAF underwent great expansion as it setup

a huge training organisation. The many new flying schools would use hundreds of new training aircraft delivered from Britain alongside others built in Australia.

Where would these new bases be located? The RAAF had already expressed a preference for regional locations. This was due to the apparent success of the army's officer training school at Duntroon, located near Canberra which at that time had a population of only around 10,000. It was thought groups of young men would be easily distracted by the nightlife of big cities, while a better fraternal atmosphere could be fostered in smaller environments.

There was also a strong preference for locations in "south-east Australia". This was only partly driven by a belief in strategic factors, such that areas of northern and western Australia were potentially vulnerable to enemy action. Instead, the reason was far more prosaic, in that the majority of trainees would be from the most populous states of New South Wales and Victoria and hence a south-east location would make it easier for them to go home for weekend leave. For these reasons, Wagga Wagga was recommended as the site for a training base just before the war by the officers who had chosen Smithfield as the best South Australian location.

Ultimately, the bulk of the schools were established in "south-east Australia" in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Several were in the Riverina region of New South Wales where the weather was rated as excellent for flying training all year round. Other locations, such as Port Pirie (as mentioned above) and Evans Head in New South Wales, were chosen because adjacent sites were suitable for bombing and gunnery ranges. However, no doubt for political reasons, but also due to the sheer magnitude of the EATS, there were also establishments in Queensland, Western Australia, and even a single school in Tasmania.

In South Australia, a flying school was established at the existing civil airport at Parafield, while three new bases were constructed at Port Pirie, Mallala and Mount Gambier. There were several