

RAAF Base Pearce

Historical Development

In response to a request from the Australian Government for an evaluation A.A.F. (Australian Air Force), Air Marshal Sir John Salmond of the Royal Air Force (RAF) arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia on the 26 June 1928. Contained in his Report was his recommendation that an Air Station should be established near Perth, the Capital City of the State of Western Australia. He recommended starting a Citizens Air Force (CAF) and locating a squadron in WA, which would be expected to cooperate in the training of Army Units and also provide added security against seaborne attacks.

Note: The approval to use the prefix “**Royal**” was finally gazetted on 13 August 1921 yet documents often referred to A.A.F.

The **Salmond Report**, compiled after two months, was not flattering for it contained a catalogue of deficiencies, yet it would remain an important document in Air Force planning for the next decade.

No action was taken regarding the Salmond Report until the expansion of the Royal Australian Air Force got underway in 1934. The Director of Air Force Works and Buildings and the Air Member for Personnel (SQNLDR A. Hepburn) finally selected a suitable site 28 miles (45km) northeast from Perth. Flying Officer V.E.Hancock (later Air Marshall, Sir V. E. Hancock) flew a small biplane, an Avro Cadet with SQNLDR Hepburn, the 2000 miles from RAAF Laverton to carry out the survey of the proposed Base. The tripod for the theodolite had to be carried on the outside of the aircraft where it caused some degree of drag especially combined with the 30 knot head winds they encountered across the Nullarbor Plains. The purchase of the 640 acres (260 hectares) from John Charles Anderson, a butcher in Perth. Title No. 1043~94 for \$6000.00 was approved by the Minister Parkhill on 6 December 1934.

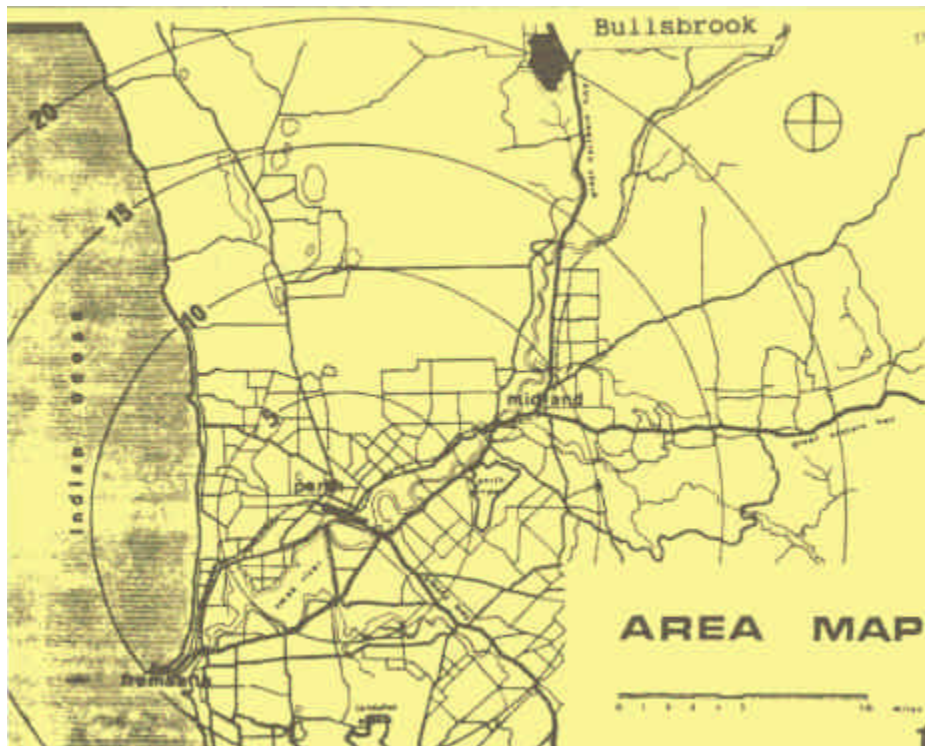
The locality for the Base (Bullsbrook) was believe to have been originally named after Lieutenant Henry Bull, a former member of the Royal Navy and a pioneer in early Western Australia. However, the "Dictionary of Western Australians" gives credit to district known as Bullsbrook to an ex-Corporal in the British Army, Richard Jones (known as Bull), who owned land in the area, and having arrived in Western Australia in 1830.

The chosen site was at Bullsbrook with the Great Northern Highway to Geraldton, adjacent to the eastern boundary while the Perth Geraldton Railway in close proximity on the western boundary.

Commencement of the building programme was delayed until 1936 with the objective of having the permanent station ready by June in 1937. The estimated cost was some \$2000,000 and would be known as “**Pearce Air Force Station**” to commemorate Sir George Foster Pearce, KCVO, P.C. a Western Australian Senator, who was Minister of Defence when the first steps were taken to obtain aircraft for Australian Defence purposes.



FLGOFF V.E.Hancock (later Air Marshall Sir V. Hancock KBE, CB, DFC)
 FLGOFF V.E. Hancock (Air Marshal Sir V.Hancock KBE ,CB, DFC) flew an Avro
 Cadet from RAAF Laverton to Pearce with SQNLDR A.Hepburn in 1934 to survey
 the site for Pearce. A Theodolite tripod was tied to the outside of the fuselage.



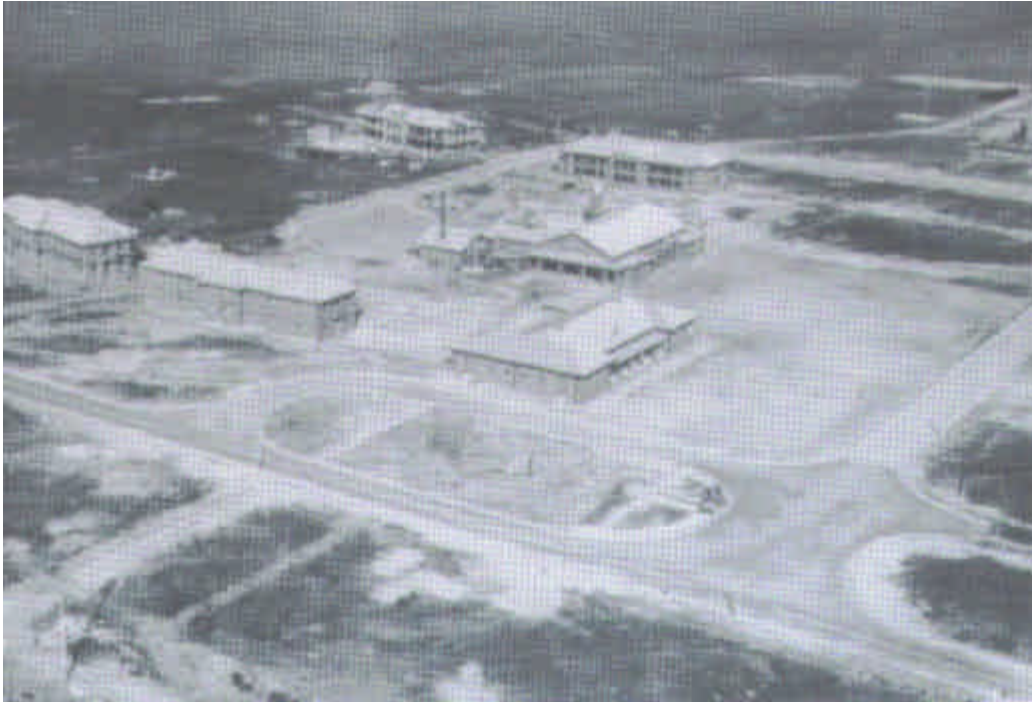
Location of the proposed RAAF Station at Bullsbrook was some 45 Km
 from Perth, the Capital of Western Australia.

In 1936 the Australian Government decided to re-equip the RAAF with a new twin engine all-purpose aircraft so Wing Commander R.J. Brownell was posted to the United Kingdom to assess the available aircraft. At RAF Manston they had been equipped with the new Avro Anson which Brownell was able to test. He visited the Avro Anson Factory and suggested a few modifications after which he had no hesitation in recommending the Avro Anson as the best available.

In June 1936 Brownell was ordered to return as soon as possible to Australia. On arrival in Australia in September 1936 the Chief of Air Staff, Air-Vice Marshal Richard Williams advised him that he had been selected to take charge of and open up a new branch of the RAAF to be formed in Western Australia.

He became the OC Flying Training Squadron at No 1 FTS while waiting for Pearce to be completed. Wing Commander Brownell, accompanied by FLTLT Hancock arrived in Perth in an Avro Cadet flown from RAAF Laverton in Victoria. The purpose of this visit was to inspect the site.

Because it was reported that the building programme at Pearce was not progressing satisfactorily, Wing Commander Ray Brownell flew Anson A4-4 the 2000 miles from Melbourne to WA to inspect the progress in July 1937. His concern regarding delays in construction of the Station results in the direction from the Air Board that he should move to Pearce and “stay on the spot.”



WGCDR Brownell was posted there with his Wife and children in March 1938. They took up residence in the unfinished Sergeants' Mess so he could monitor the building progress.



FLTLT Fleming, with LAC Jack Wilshire (later FLTLT Engineer) flew the first Avro Anson into Pearce in October 1937.

Wing Commander Brownell, (later in 1937) returned to Pearce with his wife and two daughters and took up residence in the NOT yet completed Sergeants' Mess, without the immediate benefit of power or water.

Fortunately among his key personnel there was an electrician, who had supervised the installation of a power unit so he was able to connect power and light. This pioneering situation was to extend for two and a half months.

An Advance party under Flying Officer George Kelly had also been sent to Pearce to prepare transfers of personnel and to prepared for the arrival of the "Troops" (No.23 Squadron) later in the year.

"Kelly's Mob"



As no accommodation was yet available FLGOFF Kelly and his team lived in a boarding house in Midland Junction, and with a cut lunch, travelled to Pearce each day.

Formation of No.23 (GP) Squadron, City of Perth

General Purpose

While all the delays at Pearce were occurring, No 23 (GP) Squadron City of Perth officially came into being on 3 May 1937 at RAAF Laverton with 6 Demon aircraft and a personnel strength of four officers and 68 other ranks. This unit was formed as a Cadre Squadron, which was intended to include several CAF flights with one PAF flight built around a core of PAF administrative and instructional personnel.

With Brownell in residence at Pearce, the administration of the Unit at Laverton was under the command of a RAF Flight Lieutenant Wallace Kyle, who was on two years exchange duty. Kyle was a Western Australian having been born in Kalgoorlie and educated at Guildford (WA) who, at the end of his career as an Air Chief Marshal returned to Western Australia to become the Governor in 1975-80. FLTLT Jerrold Flaming had acted as temporary CO with PLTOFF Ian Yeaman as Equipment officer and the Adjutant was PLTOFF Colin Hannah, who in later years was to become CAS (1970-72) and Governor of Queensland.

From 1937 the ferrying of aircraft and personnel across Australia commenced.

No 23 Squadron “Marched In”

On the 10th March 1938 No. 23 Squadron arrived in Perth having travelled by the Trans-Continental train. A ground party, lead by FLGOFF Hannah, were welcomed at the Perth Railway Station by Sir George Pearce and the Lord Mayor, Mr Charles Harper. During a march through the City of Perth by Squadron personnel, FLTLT Kyle timed the arrival over Perth of the air party of Hawker Demons and Anson aircraft.

A few days later WGCDR Brownell led a formation of aircraft over the City at a request of the Lord Mayor, in order to let the Citizens of Perth know they now had an Air Force to protect them.

The initial aircraft comprised of 6 Hawker Demons, 6 Avro Ansons, 4 Avro Trainers and a complement of 13 officers and 135 Airmen. Apart from FLTLT Kyle there was only one other FLTLT, Charles Pearce, who became second in command when FLTLT Kyle returned to the R.A.F. two months later (May 1938).

The Adjutant was FLGOFF Colin Hannah who later became Air Marshall, was knighted and became the Governor of Queensland, while FLTLT Pearce went on to become an Air Commodore.



On 10 March 1938 FLGOFF Hannah (later C.A.S.) led a march of No. 23 Squadron personnel through the City of Perth.



FLTLT W Kyle led No. 23 SQN's six Hawker Demons and an Avro Anson from RAAF Laverton to Pearce with perfect timing. They flew over Perth as the "troops" marched through the City.



This photograph taken at RAAF Laverton just prior to No. 23 Squadron being posted to RAAF Pearce. Front: FLTLT Fleming, WGCDR R Brownell and FLGOFF C T Hannah. Rear: Yeaman, Ingledew, ? ?, Daniels



WGCDR R Brownell with No. 23 SQN N. C. O. personnel at RAAF Laverton.

WGCDR Brownel with all
No 23 Squadron.





June 1938, **Marshall of the Royal Air Force Sir Edward Ellington**, was so anxious to inspect the immaculate No. 23 Squadron Demons that WGCDR Brownell had to hurry to catch up.



Two Royal Air Force Wellesley, long range bombers landed at Pearce on 12 December 1938 under the command of WGCDR O.R. Gayford. The return flight to Egypt was cancelled after one aircraft was badly damaged in a forced landing near Derby. (W.A. Kimberlies)

Both these officers showed a high degree of responsibility and assisted WGCDR Brownell in "showing the flag" in large country centres like Kalgoorlie, Geraldton and Carnarvon where locals turned out in large numbers. The distinctive dark blue uniforms created a lot interest.

With the new modern type buildings of the Permanent Air Force establishment on view along side the Perth to Geraldton Road, the Station Commander was soon besieged with requests from the State Government, Municipal and Business concerns to inspect the Station. Two months later the first OPEN DAY, held on Empire Day, 28 May 1938, for public inspection and was attended by some 25,000 people who were also treated to an Air Pageant.

Pearce Air Force Station Inspected

During June the Station and the Squadron was inspected by a Marshall of the Royal Air Force, Sir Edward Ellington, GCB. CBE, the only Officer of that Rank ever to visit Australia. With him was Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice Marshall R. Williams, CB, CBE, DSO. A story circulated at the time was that the Air Marshall was so struck with the spotless polish of the aircraft he wondered how much training was being done, and asked for Flying Log Books. The solid number of flying hours completed caused him to raise his eyebrows even further and earned his commendation.

The first accident to happen since the Station was established, occurred on the 16th September 1938, when as a result of engine failure, a Hawker Demon of No.23 Squadron crashed on take off and was extensively damaged. The pilot and observer however escaped with only scratches.

Cadet Officer Pilots

During the following month (October 1938) the Cadet Officers selected for the Citizen Air Force began intensive training.

They were:

J.G.Manford, D.H.Dobson, L.S.Henshilwood, L.W. Manning, E.T. Weston, C.V. Anderson, M.T. Lockwood, and R.A, Little.

Training proceeded and night flying was practised in Avro Ansons over the Darling Ranges in an area bounded by Bullsbrook, Perth, Beverly and York.

R.A.F. Vickers Wellesley Bombers Visit

Two Wellesley bombers under the command of WGCDR O. R. Grayford, D F C., A F C., landed at Pearce Station on 12th December 1938. A third aircraft had crashed near Richmond Station in NSW the previous month.



Finally in September 1939 the officers' Mess was opened, much to the delight of the Sergeants, whose Mess had been occupied by the Officers of the Squadron.



AIRCDR Bruce Courtney's reminder of his visit to RAAF Pearce in 1938 from his ship, HMAS Hobart, then in Fremantle Harbour.