



HELM



Heritage of East Lake Macquarie

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helm2281@gmail.com

STORIES FROM THE SHOEBOX

HELM is gathering episodes for our *Stories from the Shoebox* series, by interviewing residents and researching archives. They are then developed into videos which will be displayed at presentations, talks and LMCC – Community History website for posterity. Many years back, when researching the history of Swansea's primary school for centenary celebrations, George Boyd was intrigued that many people would drag out shoe boxes full of photos and memorabilia. There began an intense interest in discovering, researching and recording our local history, along with his wife, Noelene. This series is inspired by George; - author, storyteller, keeper of our history.

Launched by Scott Bevan, in Swansea Library, Sat. 27th February, 2 locals – past and present; were featured.

JAMES LEWIS BOYD. From the time Thomas Boyd landed in Swansea in 1853, the family built boats. James built over 200 boats, including 24 vessels for the American Army's small ship fleet in WWII, in his Lake Rd shipyard. A drawing of James; and a vessel under construction at Lake Rd, Swansea, are shown at the Australian War Memorial.



KEVEN HARMAN. *The Old Man of the Sea* is based on an interview. Keven recalled early escapades, adventures, and sporting successes; triumphs include surf ski championships at district, state, national and international levels. Two potentially life-changing accidents – as a teenager; and in his 70's – didn't deter Keven from his love of life, adventure and determination to participate in competitive sports. Keven was presented with a folder (photo, DVD, USB stick) celebrating his life. DVDs are the work of Lindy Wallace. Like other events, we were impacted by Covid restrictions; and hope as requirements are eased, our presentations will be enhanced. Thank you to LMCC Community History for your support.



We are looking forward to collecting more stories. Do you know of some?

HELM EVENT: SAT 29TH MAY - SWANSEA LIBRARY

Teresa Purnell, daughter of Phyllis Mook, jitterbug champion and part of Swansea greengrocers will talk about her family history. **MUST BOOK. 0438 665 019 or EMAIL HELM GATHER 1.30pm; 2pm START. AFTERNOON TEA PROVIDED.**

+ SEEN EXHIBITION - SnakeAbout next to LIBRARY

Volunteer snake catcher/educator/natural history illustrator Teresa Purnell also presents an exhibition of original illustrations, models, sketches. **10AM-2PM DAILY; UNTIL MAY 30, Swansea**

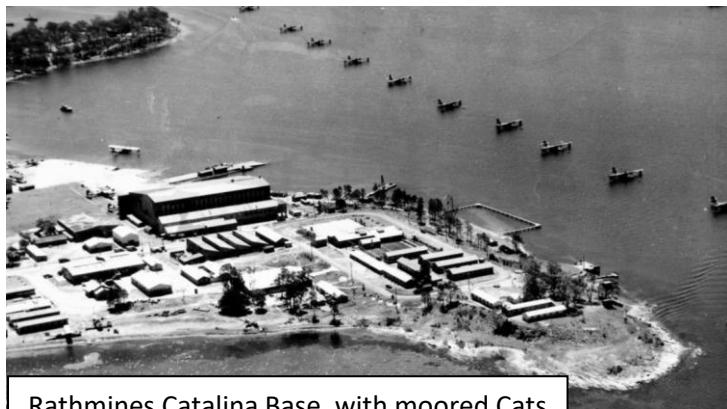
Thank you to Pat Conroy and staff, kindly supporting the community; and encouraging the preservation and sharing of our heritage.



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PROTECTING OUR SHORES – RATHMINES CATALINA BASE

A common sight during WWII were the RAAF Black Cats flying over East Lake Macquarie on their flights to and from the Catalina Base at Rathmines, the largest flying boat base in the Southern Hemisphere, protected by surrounding bush; four hidden gun emplacements at Wangi; and a radar timber tower with concrete igloos at Catherine Hill Bay. Some locals have memories of Lake water still dripping from the Cats as they flew overhead.



Rathmines Catalina Base, with moored Cats



Swansea Heads, looking west. Catalina and anti-submarine net across Channel

Rathmines was identified as a possible site for a flying boat base in 1936. In 1938 the site of c. 80 acres began to be cleared for the move of the squadron from Point Cook, Vic; and RAAF Base at Richmond, increasing in urgency as war was declared in Europe in Sep, 1939. c. 30 holiday cottages; and halls were rented while wooden framed buildings covered by tin were built to create "Tin City". By the end of Jan, 1940 the base was fully operational for various seaplanes; with Catalinas arriving in Feb, 1941. 168 Cats operated from Rathmines between 1941 and 1950. They were renowned for their abilities to land and take off in calm waters; fly long, low and slow; and carrying capacity. They were the only aircraft to serve the entire war time operations against Japan, and played a major role in ending the threat to Australia, particularly Newcastle and the East Coast; and were accompanied by communications and air-sea rescue units. The Black Cats were involved in night time mine laying of Manila Harbour and enemy ports as far as the Chinese Coast; bombing; supplying troops; and coastal watches. In 1942 as the Japanese were heading for Port Moresby, they were followed by the Cats with their extensive flight range, calling in the American and Australian navies, resulting in the Battle of the Coral Sea. 320 airmen and crew lost their lives in the Pacific War. *Source: Rathmines Catalina Memorial Park Assoc.*
The Base and its remaining structures are heritage listed. Before the war, the most people that visited the area were some 1000 holiday makers from the coalfields, camping during the Christmas vacation. At its peak, 1944-1945, Rathmines accommodated c. 3000 personnel, including training and repair facilities. Many brought their families to live in nearby areas, creating a need for the establishment of services - housing; roads; a school and post office. After the war ended the Cats were phased out , and in 1952, declared as surplus to requirement and sold off. The base ceased operating in 1956 and was officially closed in 1960; the site sold to Lake Mac Council. There were more than 230 buildings on the site; some were privately purchased and removed. By 1997, only 10 remained used; another 20 were adapted or altered; or in a state of disrepair. The Officers Mess became Club Catalina Bowling Club; the Sergeants Mess as the Westlakes Music Centre; the Hanger and the workshops became the Christadelphian School; the Hospital transformed into Don Geddes Memorial nursing home. The Picture Theatre and Gym were used as a community hall; and have recently been refurbished as Rathmines Theatre and Heritage Centre by LMCC; and the adjacent Boiler House into a café. *Source: Heritage NSW*



1. HANGER, WORKSHOP



2. OFFICER'S MESS



3. PICTURE THEATRE AND GYM

REMINISCENCES

Brian Blackshaw, Kilaben Bay..... "World War II was in "full swing". I lived with my parents on our poultry farm at Kilaben Estate, now Bayswater, on Kilaben Bay. We were not far from the Rathmines Flying Boat Base to which my parents supplied the Officers' Mess with their breakfast eggs.

On the Lake there were Catalinas and other seaplanes frequently taking off and landing, day and night, as well as "crash" boats, luggers and supply boats which tended the planes. There was plenty of interest for a small boy. Constructed around the foreshore were artificial "bays", surrounded by poles and covered by camouflage netting to hide planes in the event of enemy aerial attack. Of course, they were never used."

Ron North, Wangi Wangi..... "Already the war in Europe had begun, and even at Wangi School plans were made to take precautions in case of possible air raids. We were sent to the lake shore among the tall trees and big rocks to find places to shelter if our school should be bombed. The area was open to the sky. A marauding plane probably could have wiped us out in one sweep....."

"It must have been summer as we approached Rathmines on the way home. The huge Catalina Flying Boats were circling in a holding pattern, waiting in turn to alight on the bay and tie up on the newly prepared mooring buoys. I'm not sure how many there were, but the Catalinas would come to mean an integral part of days and nights for us at Wangi. More families arrived to take up residence."

"Events in our town were causing some surprising changes. The reality that our Air Force planned to convert the local footy field into a dump for aviation fuel for the Catalinas came as a huge shock. This was hallowed ground - an almost sacred site, home to heroes of the local rugby league and cricket teams. Especially the cricket! Way back before the war, in the early 1930s, a special event was to happen. It took several days to clean up the pitch and round up the cattle. On that weekend, our team was to host a visiting team from Sydney. The guests they bought were none other than Don Bradman and Stan McCabe..... So it was that the cricket ground was lost. The whole area was covered up by a huge mat of camouflage netting, so making it less conspicuous from the air, superimposed as it was between the waters on the narrowest part of the peninsula. On another part of the dump perimeter was the post office and the town's only public telephone. On the highest hilltop to the east, the concrete bunkers for an anti-aircraft gun emplacement were put in place to protect the Catalina base."

Source: LMCC Comm Hist

FORTRESS NEWCASTLE

"At the commencement of World War 2 Newcastle was the location of Australia's largest integrated steel-making facilities, many associated heavy industries, various minor industries, many coal mines, a busy deep harbour for merchant shipping, floating dock, ship building dockyard and critical production infrastructure. The Hunter Region became Australia's major industrial production hub for manufacturing and supplying a massive range of essential war related products, making it the most important location for mainland defence. The military operation to defend these vital industries became known as 'Fortress Newcastle' – the largest military defence establishment in Australia's history.

Fortress Newcastle extended from Port Stephens in the north, south to the Tuggerah Lakes and west to Muswellbrook. The key points to be defended were the entrance to Port Stephens itself, the whole of the Stockton Bight beach between Anna Bay and the entrance to the Newcastle Harbour, and the beach areas south to the entrance of Lake Macquarie. In December 1941, this area was defended by four fixed coastal defence forts, two major air bases and four army accommodation and training camps."

Source: Newcastle Industrial Heritage Association

WANGI GUN EMPLACEMENTS – One of 7 Anti-Aircraft Batteries that formed a part of Fortress Newcastle.

Four gun emplacements were constructed on the top of Wangi Ridge to protect the Catalina Base at Rathmines and Catherine Hill Bay Radar Station. This defence consisted of 4 x 3.7 inch anti-aircraft guns, operated by 4 teams of 11 men, and an underground bunker for command post personnel. Due to the remote location, stores arrived by water at the jetty at Wangi Point. As the threat decreased, the guns were removed by the end of 1943. The gun emplacements had been neglected until recently, when LMCC gained a Heritage NSW grant to remove the invading vegetation; plant compatible natives; and erect signage.

LMCC, AWM.



1. Gun Emplacement, Wangi; 2. Underground Bunker, Wangi; 3. Training with 3.7 inch anti-aircraft gun, Sydney.

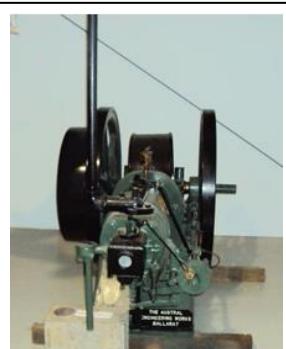
FLYING BOAT MUSEUM, LAKE BOGA, VICTORIA. (Near Swan Hill)

Initiated by the Lions Club, a modern hangar has been erected to display a restored Catalina, the original secret underground communications bunker and other exhibits. It serves as a memorial to the service men and women who were stationed at the No. 1 Flying Boat Repair Depot at Lake Boga from 1942 to 1947.

After 16 flying boats were destroyed by the Japanese attacks on Broome in March, 1942, it became imperative to locate a safer location: "South and inland". Two sites in proximity to Swan Hill were investigated – Lake Boga and Kangaroo Lake. Lake Boga was favoured, being almost circular and free of obstructions, with vacant land around its shores, making landing and take off in any direction possible. Infrastructure already existed nearby: a railhead; the Murray Valley Highway; electricity supply from Swan Hill and telecommunications.

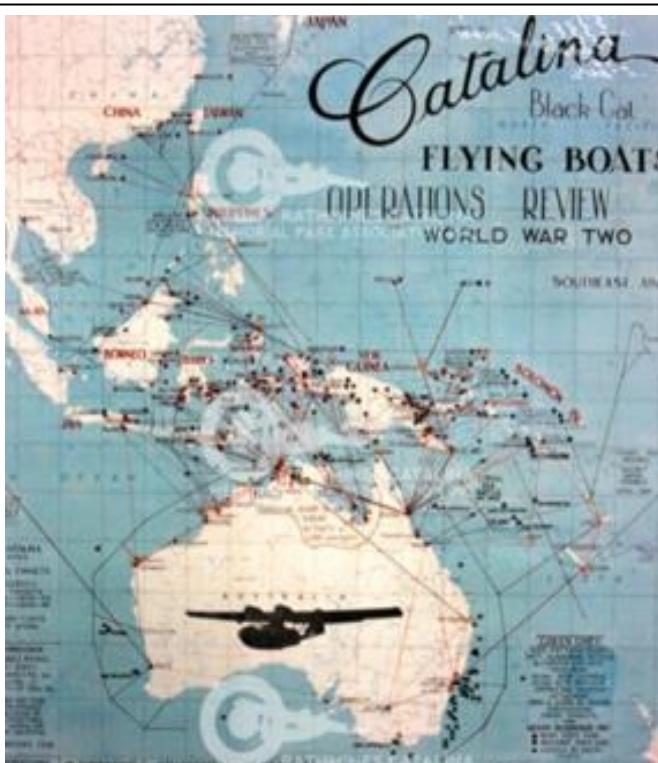
Land was requisitioned; hangars and workshops had to be built; as well as living quarters, medical facilities, and communications stations. The first Catalina arrived from Rathmines carrying stores and equipment in July, 1942. The first Catalina to be serviced arrived in August, carrying 4 crew + 12 personnel from Rathmines.

During the five years that the Depot operated, more than 400 aircraft were serviced, or repaired; over 1,000 arrivals and departures were made; and c. 800 test flights. As well as the RAAF, American and Dutch flying boats used the facility. At its peak c. 40 Officers, 800 Airmen and 100 WAAF's staffed the base. It closed in Nov, 1947.



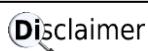
Restored Catalina; Underground bunker reconstructed from photos; Engine pumped water from Lake to Base.

Source: Flying Boat Museum



RATHMINES CATALINA
ASSOCIATION

The Association usually holds a Catalina Festival in May to ensure the memory of the largest flying boat base is not lost; (sadly cancelled 2021 due to covid). They are currently restoring "Our Girl", a Catalina rescued from Puerto Rico.



: Whilst every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of the information in this newsletter, however, the accuracy of statements or opinions expressed in articles cannot be guaranteed.