

# Historians call for Canberra's first airport, now buried beneath Dickson, to be heritage listed

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A RAAF De Havilland DH9 at Canberra's aerodrome in 1925. *(National Archives Of Australia)*

Deep beneath the streets of suburban Canberra, one of the city's best kept secrets could be about to see sunlight for the first time in nearly a century.

Few Canberrans would know that just beside a bustling shopping district, underneath some sporting fields, lays the capital's first airport.

Even fewer would know that it is possible rubble from Canberra's first known air fatality could still be beneath a suburban street.

## Sheep paddock becomes Canberra aerodrome



An aerial view of modern Dickson, with the suspected location of Canberra's aerodrome outlined and location of a 1926 fatal plane crash marked. *(Supplied)*

In the 1920s the Dickson aerodrome was essentially a sheep paddock, turned over to become the national capital's first airfield.

The airfield was originally marked on Walter Burley Griffin's plan for Canberra, and operated for a short window in 1925 and 1926, before development began for the current airport site in the Majura valley.

Despite its short existence, it was a busy few years for the Dickson aerodrome, as daring air force pilots coaxed their flimsy WWI-era biplanes into the skies to conduct a multitude of aerial photography surveys of the National Capital.

But, on February 11, 1926, tragedy struck, when a DH9 aircraft crashed on approach.



Philip 'Peter' Pitt, was killed when his RAAF De Havilland DH9 crashed on February 11, 1926.*(Supplied)*

"They flew in over Mount Ainslie, came in and turned," local resident Jane Goffman, who has spent many years researching the history of the aerodrome, said.

"As he was turning, the plane stalled. It spun, and crashed, and blew up basically."

The pilot, Duntroon College graduate Philip 'Peter' Pitt, was killed in the crash, while his observer, William Callander, died afterwards from his injuries.



The location of Canberra's first air fatality is suspected to be what is now Blacket Street in Downer.*(National Archives Of Australia)*

Despite a 1926 obituary describing Pitt as "of the finest type — a great lad in every way", he was laid to rest in Queanbeyan in an unmarked grave.

William Callander was buried, with his name misspelt, at St John's church in Reid.

Ms Goffman said, hopefully, by raising awareness of the historic aerodrome, she might also attract a sponsor to finally provide formal and accurate recognition for the victims of the city's first fatal plane crash.

## **Calls for site to be surveyed and aerodrome's remains to be heritage listed**

Fortunately for historians, pioneering Canberra photographer William James Mildenhall preserved the crash scene for posterity in a series of high quality glass plate photos — which also help identify exactly where the plane came down.

And Ms Goffman said there could be more to this story yet to be uncovered, as historians believe molten fragments of the aircraft might still remain under Blacket Street in Downer.



Pilot Philip 'Peter' Pitt was laid to rest in Queanbeyan in an unmarked grave. Observer William Callander was buried, with his name misspelt, at St John's church in Reid. *(National Archives Of Australia)*

Ms Goffman said the history of Canberra's first air fatality and the aerodrome more broadly was worthy of passing on to a new generation.

She is pushing to have remnants of the aerodrome surveyed and excavated, and placed on the heritage register.

"This was the one and only aerodrome, and the first," she said.

Ms Goffman said heritage listing would protect the site's scant remnants — including buried concrete markers that delineated the airfield's boundaries.

"It's really wonderful, it's an exciting opportunity to actually tell the heritage of the city," she said.

"It goes back so far. And an aerodrome, what a wonderful thing!"



Ms Goffman says a small, not well-known plaque at the Dickson Library, is the only public commemoration of Canberra's aerodrome. *(Supplied)*

The heritage nomination has the support of National Trust ACT, which wants to have key sites surveyed with ground-penetrating radar.

"Old Canberra is vanishing rapidly before our eyes, and anything from the 1920s is worth preserving," National Trust president Gary Kent said.

He said any concrete markers could be excavated and marked for posterity.

"We are very sure there is something under there. Exactly what it is after 100 years, we're not sure," Mr Kent said.

"But fingers crossed. Otherwise, no-one might believe us that there was an airport here."

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