



MEDIA RELEASE

Unit 2.03, Level 2, Griffin Centre
20 Genge Street, Canberra ACT 2600

PO BOX 1144
CIVIC SQUARE ACT 2608

EMAIL: info@nationaltrustact.org.au
WEB: www.nationaltrustact.org.au

T: 02 6230 0533

PATRON: The Hon Margaret Reid AO

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Heritage nomination for Canberra's original aerodrome

How many of Canberra's residents know the city's original aerodrome was at Dickson?

And how many might know the aerodrome—which half a century later became known as the Northbourne Aviation Ground—played a major role in the formation of the national capital?

The aerodrome stretched from Dickson Library to the western half of Dickson playing fields, and the library bears a plaque that 'marks the site of Canberra's first aerodrome'.

In 1923, Defence commandeered the site from Edward Shumack, taking over the southern section of the soldier settlement block that was granted to him when he returned to Canberra from the Western Front in 1919.

The aerodrome was fenced and marked out, and at least 34 RAAF flights landed on the grassy field at Dickson to carry out aerial surveying and mapping for the Federal Capital Commission. This was cutting-edge technology at the time and resulted in bringing Walter Burley Griffin's dream to life. Both military and civilian planes shared the aerodrome.

When the aerodrome was operating—on what is now the community precinct that includes Dickson Pool next to Antill Street—aircraft were guided by an 18-metre, whitewashed concrete ring. That ring was in the very centre of the landing ground, with whitewashed concrete markers at the four corners.

Now a joint heritage nomination is being made by the National Trust of Australia (ACT) and No. 3 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force Association, for the last tangible remnants of the aerodrome—the central ring marker and two of the lockspit boundary markers—which are believed to be buried beneath the surface and are therefore archaeological remains.

These markers are the only historical links to the original Canberra aerodrome.

“The reason this heritage nomination is being made now is to ensure there’s adequate room around the markers to do further research and begin to tell the story of what was once there,” Gary Kent, President of the National Trust of Australia (ACT), said.

“There is very little evidence of the aerodrome today. The heritage nomination seeks to preserve the key remnants—the boundary markers for two corners of the landing ground and the remnants of a 60-foot concrete ring, used as a marker for the centre of the aerodrome.

“As soon as we get provisional registration, we will seek help from an institution or university to map the locations more precisely, using ground-penetrating radar.”

The aerodrome operated from the beginning of March 1924 to November 1926, when a second aerodrome was established in Majura Valley in time for the opening of the first Parliament House.

“While some people have heard about the first aerodrome, very few probably realise its pivotal role in the founding of the national capital,” Mr Kent said.

“After Walter Burley Griffin's final blueprint was accepted, the Federal Capital Commission was determined to realise his dream. To do that, the commission used aerial surveys and photography – ground-breaking technology at the time. The very first Canberra aerodrome became a critical launching pad, with RAAF flights dispatched there from Richmond in NSW, to conduct essential aerial survey work.

“Sadly, one of the RAAF planes crashed there on 11 February 1926 on a mission to survey the Murrumbidgee, becoming Canberra's first fatal air crash.

“A bravery certificate and medal were awarded to Walter Johnson who was ploughing in the Shumacks' field near the crash site. He rushed to the burning aircraft and managed to pull the observer out; however, that man later died of his injuries and is buried at St John’s in Reid. The pilot, a champion athlete who had trained at Duntroon, was killed on impact. He is buried at Queanbeyan’s Riverside cemetery.”

For further information, please contact:

Gary Kent, President, National Trust of Australia (ACT)

- Mob 0419 854 211; Email president@nationaltrustact.org.au

Fact sheet plus a selection of Mildenhall’s photos of Canberra Aerodrome from the National Archives are attached.