

## SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

### SIGNIFICANT AVIATION EVENTS

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#### History of RAAF Gawler 1941-46

##### 1941-43



*The wartime runways at Gawler remain in use today, mainly by gliders of the Adelaide Soaring Club which are stored in the sheds visible in this photograph. The Gawler bypass runs alongside the airfield and is visible on the right hand side [Peter Ingman 13 March 2020].*

A site near Gawler had been briefly considered by the RAAF for a South Australian training airfield in 1938, although Smithfield, a short distance to the south, became the preferred location (on this occasion South Australia missed out and the RAAF chose a New South Wales site at Wagga Wagga instead). By late 1941 the Gawler site was again under consideration, this time for development as an operational airfield to support a squadron in respect to the defence of Adelaide. Gawler is just 25 miles by air to the north of Adelaide, and the chosen site for the airfield was on flat land immediately west of Gawler itself.

After the outbreak of the Pacific War, some very rushed plans for local defence were approved by the Air Board. This included the construction of an airfield at Gawler with facilities for an operational squadron, including hangars and workshops, at a cost of £174,347. However, after the experience of the first weeks of the war which saw many Allied aircraft destroyed on the ground in Hawaii, the Philippines and Malaya, greater emphasis was placed on utilising multiple dispersal sites as a means of protecting aircraft. Accordingly, in early February 1942, plans for construction of most of the facilities at Gawler, including hangars and other buildings, were cancelled (indeed by 1944, less than half of the £174,347 authorised for Gawler had been spent and the authorisation was reduced accordingly).

In the revised dispersal-orientated plans of February 1942 Gawler airfield itself was still to be built as a "Main Aerodrome" which would be supported by a separate maintenance base ("Echelon") and two satellite landing strips. This concept was used by the RAAF in April 1942 plans for the defence of Adelaide which included three local squadrons to be based among the following locations:

#### Interceptor / Fighter Squadron

Main Aerodrome	Myponga
Echelon	Kuitpo
Satellites	McLaren Vale, Mount Compass

#### Dive-Bomber Squadron

Main Aerodrome	Gawler
Echelon	Nuriootpa
Satellites	Templers, Lewiston

#### Army Cooperation Squadron

Main Aerodrome	Tarlee
Echelon	Riverton
Satellites	Hamley Bridge, Marrabel

#### Repair / Salvage Units

Sedan, Calperum Station (near Renmark)

Gawler was the only one of the locations listed where any construction work had then commenced (by the South Australian Highways and Local Government Department), but the RAAF insisted that construction of the nearby echelon and satellite strips (Nuriootpa, Templers and Lewiston) be commenced immediately “without waiting for surveys to be made and detailed plans to be prepared”. A sum of £75,000 was authorised for this work, although it is unclear if that also included the work being undertaken at Gawler itself. By spreading Highways Department resources thinly, this policy had a delaying effect on the work at Gawler which ultimately took the best part of a year to complete.

While work was undertaken at a few of these secondary locations (namely Nuriootpa, Templers and Myponga) after mid-1942 the strategic outlook had changed substantially such that there was little danger of southern Australia being invaded and hence no further need for most of these sites. By September 1942 the work at Templers had been cancelled, and soon afterwards all construction efforts were solely focused at Gawler.

Meanwhile, in July the RAAF had decided that all “parent” airfields should have two hard-surfaced runways, each of at least 5,000 feet to enable the operation of medium bombers in all weather. This meant the main runway at Gawler, then being constructed, would be extended from a hard-surfaced 3,600-foot length to 6,000 feet, while the cross runway would be hard-surfaced to a length of 5,000 feet.

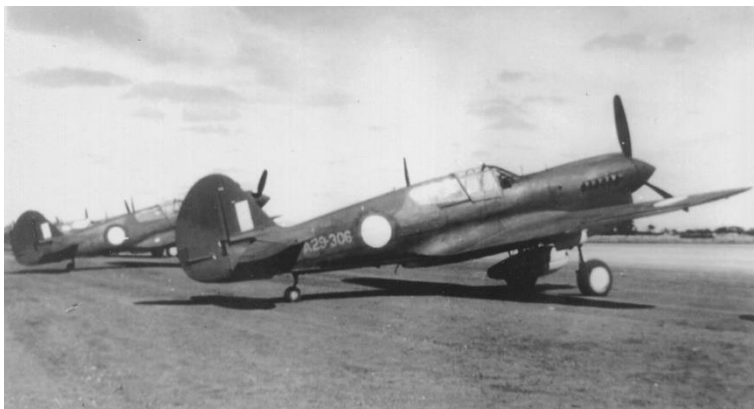
At this time the Highways Department was experiencing difficulty at Gawler due to variable soil types and stony ground. It was felt that the limestone rubble used in the runways was better suited to mixing with cement rather than bitumen. After much technical consideration, by November it had been decided to complete one runway with a gravel cement mix and the other and some taxiways with bitumen. The main south-west / north-east runway was completed in November 1942 and the cross runway followed a few months later in early 1943.

Perhaps surprisingly, the 1942 plans for a fighter and dive-bomber squadron to be based in the vicinity of Adelaide did eventuate in 1943. Both Nos. 21 (dive-bomber) and 86 (fighter) Squadrons were present at Gawler during the year, but only for relatively short periods.

Prior to the arrival of these squadrons, the first RAAF unit to be based at Gawler was No. 8 Mobile Works Squadron. This unit had been newly formed in Victoria and commenced a move to Gawler on 8 January 1943. However, the unit struggled as most of the experienced personnel remained in Victoria sourcing plant and equipment. Combined with the lack of facilities at Gawler and the imminent formation there of No. 86 Squadron, it was decided to return 8MWS to Melbourne, a move which was completed by 20 March. A few weeks later the unit moved to Millingimbi in the Northern Territory.

In a similar timeframe, the No. 11 Works Supply Unit formed at Gawler on 16 January 1943. This was a small unit, comprising just 24 officers and airmen. Its role was to erect prefabricated buildings, drill water bores and administer the general distribution of stores and fuel. On 16 March 1943 the unit moved to Pine Creek in the Northern Territory.

On 4 March 1943 No. 86 Squadron formed at Gawler under the command of Squadron Leader WJ Meehan (becoming the only regular RAAF squadron to form in South Australia). The squadron had a strength of 24 Curtiss P-40M Kittyhawk fighters and around 300 officers and airmen. Among the first to arrive was a contingent of 60 ground crew from No. 2 Operational Training Unit at Mildura who initially looked forward to the posting, and one former member recalled hearing “wild rumours that Gawler was a most up-to-date air base with all mod cons including underground hangars”. The truth was quite the opposite, with Gawler having virtually no buildings of any kind and only basic refuelling facilities. The men lived in tents in the grounds of Gawler racecourse a few miles away where they used the public toilets and cold showers.



*No. 86 Squadron P-40M A29-306 at Gawler, among the first batch of aircraft received by the unit on 15 March 1943.  
(Fred Brooks collection via Rob Richter)*

In mid-March the first P-40s were issued from 1 Aircraft Depot at Laverton and flown to Gawler via Nhill and Mallala. Despite the basic conditions, the squadron soon settled in and began work with much enthusiasm. Barely six weeks later the squadron was getting ready for operations and preparing to depart. During this brief period the unit had formed close bonds with the people of Gawler, partly because a member of the squadron, Pilot Officer Ivor Hatcher, had grown up in the area and had attended Gawler High School.

On the eve of the squadron's departure on 1 May, several members stole a metal eagle prominently displayed on the gates of a Gawler iron foundry business. When the squadron arrived in Merauke, New Guinea, and began combat operations the eagle became a treasured unit mascot. In September 1943 Hatcher was lost while flying through a storm on a ferry flight from Horn Island to Merauke. Many years later, during a reunion in Gawler in 1968 to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of No. 86 Squadron, the eagle was returned to the town where it was displayed for many years in the Gawler Town Hall in memory of Hatcher.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*No. 86 Squadron Kittyhawk fighters in New Guinea in 1944, by which time they had received white tails for recognition purposes. (Australian War Memorial)*

The second RAAF flying squadron to be based at Gawler was No. 21 Squadron, which had been formed in 1936 prior to flying Brewster Buffalo fighters during the defence of Malaya and Singapore. After evacuating via Java to Fremantle in March 1942, it was not reformed until 13 September 1943 at Gawler, this time as a dive-bomber unit. Within the following week some 14 Vultee Vengeances had been delivered to the squadron. By the end of September, the unit comprised 10 officers and 124 airmen, which was far below its establishment strength of 334 personnel.

An influx of flying personnel joined the squadron in early October, fresh from No. 4 Operational Training Unit at Williamstown which was the RAAF dive-bomber training unit. A permanent commanding officer, Squadron Leader Bryan Todd, also arrived from No. 4 OTU at this time. By the end of October, the squadron was approaching full strength with a total of 293 personnel.

Additional pilots joined the squadron from No. 4 OTU in early November, before Squadron Leader Todd led a formation of nine Vengeances from Gawler on 24 November, for Lowood in Queensland via Deniliquin. The next day another six Vengeances departed Gawler for Lowood, as did the ground personnel who left by train. From Lowood No. 21 Squadron would eventually deploy to New Guinea in early 1944, having spent just over two months at Gawler.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Line-up of Vultee Vengeances of No. 21 Squadron at Nadzab, New Guinea in February 1944. The aircraft in the foreground, A27-60, had only been received by the squadron on 18 November 1943, just prior to the unit's departure from Gawler. (Australian War Memorial)*

## 1944-45

By the start of 1944, the airfield at Gawler had seen some use but without permanent facilities the value of the base was open to question. By this time the only real structure on the base was a Duty Pilot's control tower reportedly built of "bush timber" and positioned close to the intersection of both runways. However, the long runways were very well-constructed and were in fact the only sealed and all-weather runways in South Australia at this time. This meant that it was the only airfield in the state that could accommodate heavy aircraft such as B-24 Liberators.

The USAAF 380<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group was equipped with B-24s and began operations from Fenton in the Northern Territory in mid-1943. The one advantage the unit had was that, using the long range of its B-24s, regular flights could be made to Sydney to enable personnel to get regular periods of rest and recreation. On the return leg the aircraft were loaded with fresh food, alcohol and other luxuries in what became known as "fat cat" missions.

The 380<sup>th</sup> BG was soon directed to send the "fat cat" missions to Adelaide instead of crowded Sydney, and on these visits the B-24s made use of Gawler airfield. Initially the Americans were wary of the new location, which offered only a pale imitation of Sydney's nightlife. But in time the 380<sup>th</sup> grew fond of Adelaide, with the following entry in their unit history *The Flying Circus*:

Adelaide is a beautiful town, with the scenic Torrens River coursing slowly, windingly through it, and the small boats and the swans moving slowly on its surface; with the green hills in the background and the clean, light-coloured buildings of the city itself. Soft beds with clean sheets, warm baths, good food with white linen tables, gleaming silver, candles, good wine – and friendly people – those are things which can never be forgotten by a tired, mentally fatigued fugitive from the Northern Territory who went there.

The Adelaide “fat cat” flights became regular occurrences throughout 1944. On 22 August 1944 residents of Adelaide read the following afternoon newspaper headline “Bomber Drops Liquor & Eggs on Adelaide”. The article began:

Residents of West Parkway, Colonel Light Gardens, were showered with champagne, sparkling burgundy, beer, Coca-Cola, eggs and oranges about 8am today. The shower came in crates and bottles accidentally dropped from a big, low-flying American bomber.

The bomb-bay of a B-24 had inadvertently opened while the pilot was conducting a “farewell sweep” over Adelaide’s southern suburbs: fortunately, nobody on the ground was hurt. The “fat cat” B-24s were dedicated aircraft no longer fit for combat, and this particular B-24 was named *Adelaide Fever*. In February 1945 the 380<sup>th</sup> BG moved from the Northern Territory to the Philippines and the Adelaide “fat cat” flights ended.

Meanwhile, for some time construction activity had been underway at Gawler in respect to the movement there of the Adelaide Wireless Transmitting Station. This unit had been formed in March 1942 to provide communication facilities to RAAF units operating in and around Adelaide. It had operated from the basement of the North Adelaide Golf Club and also from premises in Barton Terrace, North Adelaide.

The specialised construction for this unit at Gawler was rather elaborate and appears to be a hangover of the plans for Gawler

devised during the invasion emergency of early 1942. It included a large (136-foot long x 30-foot wide) underground bunker with a 1-foot thick curved concrete ceiling. This housed the central communications facility which was to be staffed around the clock and included a dozen AR7 receivers, teleprinters and a telephone switchboard. Some three miles to the west of the airfield was a transmitting building of similar size but which was only partly underground. Nearby were two



*Supplies being loaded onto a USAAF “fat cat” B-24D Liberator at Gawler, named Beautiful Betsy, circa 1944. This particular aircraft disappeared on a flight from Fenton to Brisbane in February 1945. The wreckage was not found until 1994, in a Queensland national park. (Bob Livingstone)*

antennas mounted on 120-foot tall steel lattice masts, as well as several other antennas mounted on 60-foot tall timber masts.



*Nose art on the "fat cat" Liberator named Adelaide Fever.  
(Bob Livingstone)*

Aside from the core communications role, the unit could also function in a Direction Finding (D/F) capacity which helped pinpoint aircraft through the receiving angle of their radio signal. Data from two ground stations was needed, but D/F was very valuable in assisting lost aircraft, especially in bad weather or at night, prior to the widespread use of radar. However as nearby Parafield also had a D/F capability, the usefulness of Gawler in this respect was limited.

The facility was largely staffed by members of the Women's Auxiliary

Australian Air Force who were responsible for maintaining communications by radio, teleprinter, telegraph and telephone channels. In addition, much clerical work was performed in encyphering and decyphering coded messages. At the start of 1945, the unit had 188 personnel on strength of which 141 were WAAAFs. The arrival of such numbers entailed an associated building program for accommodation, as in early 1944 Gawler only had accommodation for around 20 RAAF personnel. An accommodation village was subsequently constructed at Willaston a few miles from the airfield.

The Adelaide W/T Unit moved to Gawler in June 1944. In January 1945 it processed some 31,000 messages and the following month it was renamed the Gawler Telecommunication Unit. However, with the end of the war in sight, signals traffic was not growing and in March the commanding officer of the GTU recommended a reduction in personnel strength by 22% due to a surplus of staff and discontent among those without adequate work to do.



*Entrance to the semi-underground Gawler transmitting station, c1945. (Fred Brooks collection, via Rob Richter)*

There is evidence that during this 1944-45 period Gawler was classed as an Advanced Operational Base,

with the small number of RAAF personnel stationed there for refuelling and servicing the occasional aircraft being detached from nearby Parafield. Among aircraft using Gawler were training aircraft from Mallala which conducted instrument approach exercises with the D/F station.

In April 1945 RAF Transport Command began investigations about the use of Gawler for its Indian Ocean transport flights connecting Ceylon with Australia. This was in relation to an extensive support structure in Australia being planned for the British Pacific Fleet. Among this support was No. 300 Group, RAF, which comprised two Dakota squadrons and a flight of Liberators. From June, one of the Dakota squadrons (No. 238) was based at Parafield.



In June 1945 RAF Liberators began their regular stopovers at Gawler, using the airfield about twice a week. Initially this caused inconvenience to the GTU, which had to provide meals for up to 20 persons at short notice. Subsequently a party of RAF ground personnel, known as Staging Post 191, was detached to Gawler from No. 238 Squadron, RAF, at Parafield. This unit comprised about 80 personnel. Plans were made to build permanent accommodation for it at Gawler, including VIP accommodation for aircrew and passengers, but in

*RAAF accommodation camp at Gawler in 1945. The officer's mess is on the right with a sentry hut behind it. Between 1949 and 1952 the camp was used for migrant accommodation. (Fred Brooks collection via Rob Richter)*



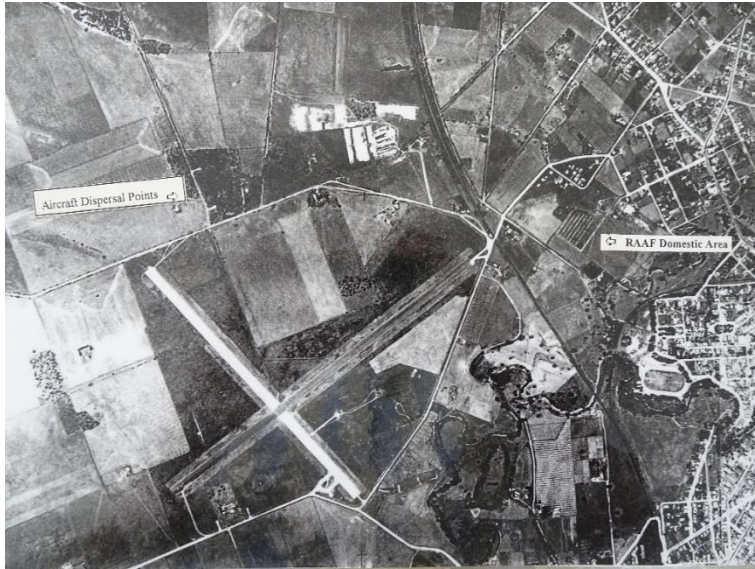
*operating Morse code pads in the underground Gawler Telecommunication Unit bunker. (Fred Brooks collection via Rob Richter)*

the interim tented accommodation was used. This unit undertook aircraft refuelling and servicing, as well as providing guards and crash tender parties.

By August traffic at Gawler had increased considerably, with RAAF Liberators also now regularly using the base. With the surrender of Japan in mid-August, many of these aircraft were engaged in transport flights including the repatriation of POWs. Among the routes were Guildford (WA) – Gawler – Laverton and Darwin-Gawler-Laverton. It was considered that Gawler could only cope with 3-

4 Liberator visits per day as there were no hard-standing areas, and the second runway was used as a parking strip. At this time fuel was brought in by rail from Birkenhead. Two underground tanks were used by the RAAF while a third tank was used by Qantas.

During September, some 44 RAAF Liberators and 12 Lancastrians made use of Gawler, all of which were accommodated "very efficiently" by Staging Post 191. In October 50 Liberators and 12 Lancastrians visited, but by November usage had fallen to about one aircraft per day as RAAF



*Aerial view of the Gawler airfield in 1944, showing the different appearance of the cement and bitumen runways. The adjacent urban area of Gawler is visible on the right hand side. (Adelaide Soaring Club via Rob Richter)*

Liberator visits decreased. Also, at this time Staging Post 191 was disbanded and an RAAF contingent took over their servicing duties.

Also in June 1945, Qantas Avro Lancastrians began using Gawler, initially on a bi-weekly basis. These aircraft, a transport variant of the Lancaster bomber, had replaced Catalinas on the Indian Ocean flights which were part of the longer route through to London. Gawler was used as a refuelling stopover between Learmonth in WA and Mascot in Sydney.

In December Qantas Lancastrians stopped using Gawler, but Qantas Liberators began bi-weekly stops there. Total visits for the month were: 10 RAAF Liberators, 1 RAF

Liberator, 9 Qantas Liberators, 4 Qantas Lancastrians.

Ever since the communications unit had moved into Gawler in 1944, a comprehensive construction program had accompanied it. As mentioned, the centrepiece was a large communications bunker. However, the construction and installation of various other facilities and items of equipment dragged on into 1945. A series of smaller bunkers was built near the airfield, some of which housed underground powerplants for the communications equipment. Other bunkers were used to store bombs and pyrotechnics.

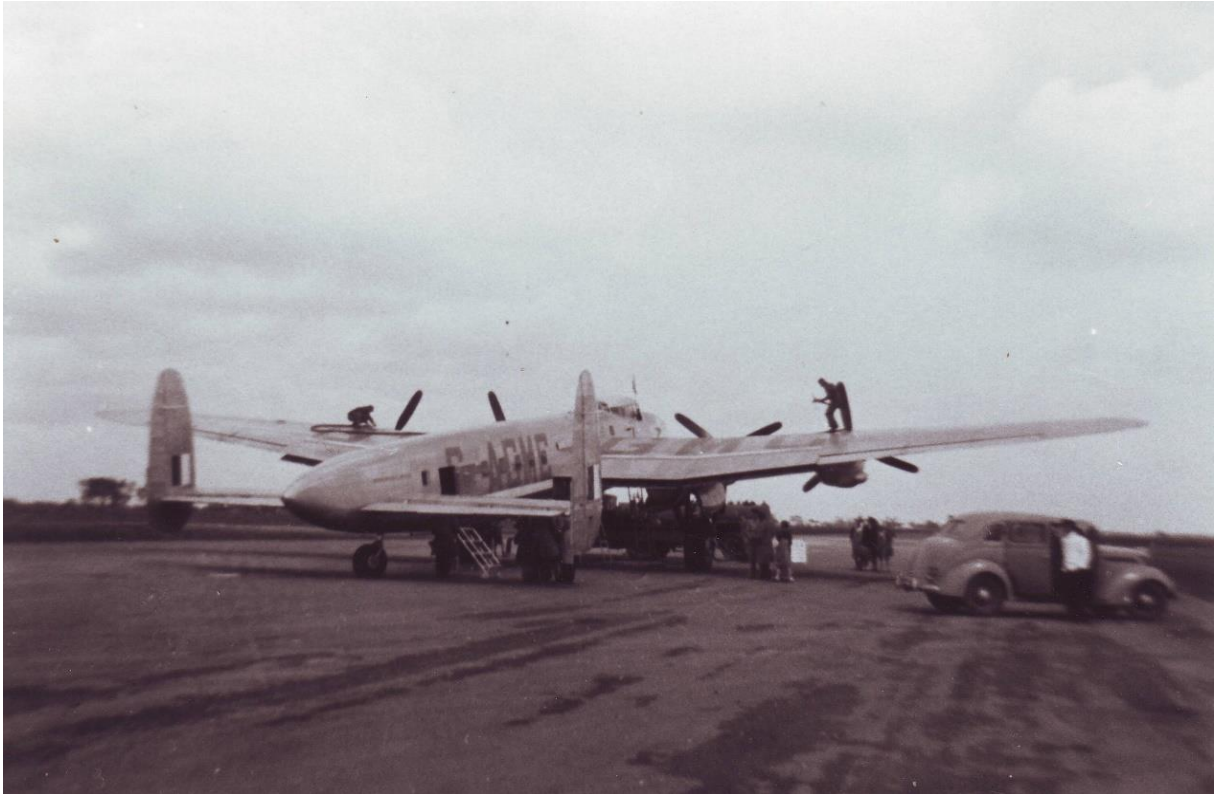


*Tents used to accommodate Staging Post 191, RAF, at Gawler during 1945. (Fred Brooks collection via Rob Richter)*

In respect to some of these installations, there was little apparent urgency in getting the items into service. A Very High Frequency D/F station was completed in 1945 but stood idle for several months while awaiting calibration. After the calibration was finally completed in November, it was decided not to use the station. The GTU Commanding Officer's report recording that:

At the present juncture it is recommended that this station be not manned as the number of aircraft requiring VHF D/F aids around this area is so small that it would be uneconomical to man the station.

There are ample radio aids both at Parafield and Gawler consisting of VHF radio range, homer beacons, M/F and H/F D/F stations, and ASV beacon to provide safe service to aircraft.



*A BOAC Avro Lancastrian, G-AGMC, at Gawler in 1945. These aircraft were operated on the Karachi - Australia route on behalf of Qantas.  
(Fred Brooks collection via Rob Richter)*



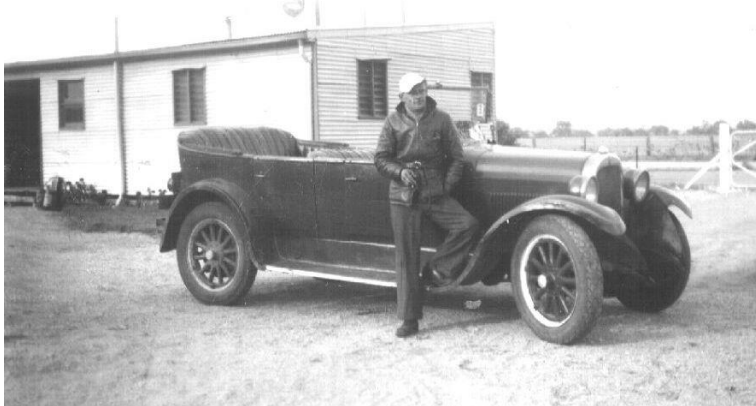
*An unusual visitor to Gawler in October 1945 was this USAAF B-29 Waltzing Matilda, which was touring the country on a Victory Bond drive. (608 Sqn AAFC website)*

In February 1946 aircraft traffic had diminished to just eight visits as Qantas aircraft were now flying direct between Perth and Sydney. Signals traffic had also decreased significantly with the GTU reducing working hours and personnel strength. There were 12 aircraft visits in March, but the GTU was now on notice to disband and all WAAAFs were posted out. During May equipment was sent to a stores collection centre at Parafield and bulk fuel was returned to Birkenhead. On 31 May the buildings were handed over to a civilian caretaker and the GTU was disbanded.



*A Qantas Liberator transport at Gawler, c1945-46, with a second dark-coloured Liberator in the background. (Fred Brooks collection via Rob Richter)*

Given the special value of Gawler's all-weather runways for use by heavy bombers, after the base was closed the RAAF kept all the communications equipment on site. This was maintained by way of daily inspections until a break-in occurred at a transmitter station in 1951 and the equipment was removed and taken to Mallala.



*A man poses with his Dodge car in 1950. The building in the background is the TAA terminal building constructed at Gawler for use by occasional airline flights. (Adelaide*

For several years Gawler remained an all-weather alternate landing ground for civil DC-3s and other aircraft using Parafield, which still did not have a paved runway. This status continued until the construction of Adelaide's new airport at West Beach which commenced operations in 1955.

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