

RAAF at Port Pirie

Part I: 2 Bombing & Gunnery School 1941-43

The die was cast for the RAAF in WWII with the signing of the Empire Air Training Scheme agreement in December 1939. Under this scheme, the RAAF would setup an extensive training organisation to supply aircrew for the rapidly expanding Royal Air Force.

The non-pilot aircrew were categorised as Observer / Navigators, Wireless Operator-Air Gunners and Air Gunners. Specialised training for these positions was to be undertaken in Wireless Air Gunners Schools (WAGS) and Bombing and Gunnery Schools (BAGS). Three BAGS were established:

1 BAGS Evans Head, NSW	August 1940
2 BAGS Port Pirie, SA	June 1941
3 BAGS West Sale, Vic	January 1942

The function of these schools was to teach bombing and aerial gunnery in accordance with the standard RAF syllabus.

Selection of Port Pirie site

Obvious advantages of the Port Pirie location were available space and good flying conditions year-round. However, equally important was the adjacent coastal land suitable for bombing and gunnery ranges. Eventually there were nine separate ranges which ranged over 32 miles of coastland. Six ranges were overland, and three ranges were over-water (two for bombing, one for aiming at moving surface targets). A portion of the 2BAGS personnel were responsible for operating the range. This included a marine section operating several water craft.



Aerial view of the Port Pirie base, showing the extensive number of buildings that housed over 1,000 personnel (SAAM via Langdon Badger)

When 2BAGS was officially formed on 15th June 1941, under the command of Wing Commander Dalton, the Port Pirie site had been extensively developed such that it could accommodate hundreds of men and dozens of aircraft. By the end of June, the unit strength was 23 officers and 564 men. This strength would grow steadily until, just before the Pacific War on 30th November 1941, the unit reported strength of 32 officers and 1,069 men (including 179 trainees).

On the 1st July, two courses were underway: Course 1 with 44 Aircrew trainees and 3 Wireless/Telegraphy trainees; and Course 2 (with 44 and 4, respectively). Indeed, Course 1 had already completed some of its course at 2 Aerial Observers School, Mount Gambier. Generally, the courses were for eight weeks duration. From this point onwards 2BAGS graduated airmen at an average rate of around 100 per month.

The principal aircraft type operated was the Fairey Battle Mark 1. This could train men in bombing or gunnery (a few were also equipped for Wireless instruction). The fuselage was large enough to accommodate up to three trainees who could each take turns in either the rear gun or bomb-aimers position, making it an efficient training platform. The Mark 1 Battles were ex-RAF machines, some of which had seen service during the Battle of France in 1940. These were used for the bombing and gunnery training missions. The latter were flown against targets on the water (air-ground gunnery) or against towed aerial targets (air-air gunnery).



A flight of Battle Mk1s over Port Pirie (Port Pirie RAAF Assoc. via SAAM / Langdon badger)

The second sub-type was the Battle TT, which was fitted with target-towing equipment. These were painted in high-visibility yellow and black stripes. The TTs usually flew with two crew: a pilot and a towing winch operator.

2BAGS received 24 Battles soon after forming in June 1941, and numbers rose steadily until the end of the year when the unit had over 80 of the type (mainly Mark 1s; probably only up to a dozen TTs were on strength at any time). The Battles were received from 1 Aircraft Park in Geelong where they were assembled after shipment from Britain in crates. During this time 2BAGS also operated a handful of Wirraways, a single Gypsy Moth biplane (A7-110, "allotted from storage in Canberra", ex-VH-UIJ) and two Ryan trainers. The Gypsy Moth was used for communications while the Ryans appear to have found a specialised role as target-towing trainers (2BAGS would operate a small number of Ryans throughout its existence).

In November 1942 the organisation of 2BAGS was as shown, and it is likely this was the same organisation used throughout 1941-43:

Four Flights:	Battle Mark Is
Towing Flight:	Battle TTs
Towing Practice & Communications:	Ryans; Gypsy Moth

Overall the Fairey Battle was regarded as a reliable and tough aircraft, well suited to the training environment. The main criticism was that the Rolls Royce Merlin cooling system couldn't cope with the high summer temperatures at Port Pirie, where the runway temperatures might be 50° C+. One solution was to fly with the lower engine cowls removed.

Non-fatal accidents were not systematically recorded, but there is anecdotal evidence that incidents such as forced-landings were fairly common. Otherwise 2BAGS began with a good safety record: there were no fatal accidents in 1941.



Battle TT at 2 BAGS, showing the distinctive yellow and black striped paint scheme used by the target-towers. (D Vincent via J Lever book, p.85)

Outbreak of Pacific War

After the outbreak of the Pacific War and the subsequent threat to Australia itself, the EATS units became listed in the RAAF Order of Battle. The RAAF Official History categorised 2BAGS as a Second Line (Reserve) unit with an establishment of 36 Battles. This was a fair reflection of the number of Mark 1 Battles (and trained crew) that might be available for war duties at any time.

Subsequently many of the EATS units were designated as reserve squadrons. While they received squadron numbers, these squadrons were never formally raised so very few records exist. However for some months of 1942 EATS aircraft flew operational armed patrols in certain areas of Australia. This was certainly the case for 52 (Reserve) Squadron at Evans Heads which flew 1BAGS Battles.

Among the 2BAGS records, there is a single reference to the formation of 54 (Reserve) Squadron on 15th August 1942, comprising a strength of 262 of the 2BAGS airmen. However, this is slightly baffling as by that time the Japanese threat had passed. Indeed, 52 Squadron at Evans Heads disbanded on 30th June 1942!

Another role performed by 2BAGS Battles at this time was to tow targets over Whyalla for the benefit of the 3.7-inch AA gun battery which protected the steelworks there.

The Port Pirie base felt the war emergency in February 1942 when a number of the unit's motor transport vehicles were urgently sent up to Darwin. Also in February 1942 was the visit by a group of USAAF P-40E fighters which were undertaking an urgent cross-country flight from Amberley to Fremantle (they were to be loaded on the old carrier USS *Langley* for what would be a doomed mission to reinforce Java). At Port Pirie, 15 of these P-40Es, under the command of Major Floyd Pell of the 33rd Provisional Fighter Squadron, were stopped and diverted north to Darwin.

One of Pell's pilots, Richard Pingree, was delayed at Port Pirie for several days with engine trouble. Pingree was joined by one of the pilots destined for Fremantle, Bryce Wilhite, who had suffered a blown tyre at Port Pirie on 16th February. Both pilots were accommodated in the RAAF officer's quarters during their few days at Port Pirie, and attended a RAAF dining-in night on the 17th. After repairs to his engine, Pingree undertook a test flight on 19th February. While turning in to his landing approach his luggage door came open. The P-40E crashed into the swampy area at the end of the runway and Pingree was killed. This young American pilot was the first fatality at Port Pirie.

1942 – Formation of 2OTU

Serviceability of the 2BAGS Battles had hovered around 50% in 1941. After the outbreak of the Pacific War, this dropped further as war pressures meant resources were allocated elsewhere. By April 1942, Battle serviceability had plummeted to just 16%. However this coincided with the formation of 2 Operational Training Unit at Port Pirie on 6th April. This unit was largely equipped with Wirraways, but also received nine (presumably serviceable) Battles from 2BAGS.

After a short time, 2OTU vacated Port Pirie on 14th May and moved to its permanent base at Mildura. Freed of this pressure, 2BAGS serviceability steadily rose over the remainder of the year. By the end of October it had a total of 80 aircraft on strength, for a serviceability of 63%. Alongside

the Gypsy Moth and Ryans, at least two Tiger Moths were operated for a short time. Maintenance of these light aircraft, and some of the Battles, was undertaken by Guinea Airways and ANA at Parafield.

During 1942, 2 BAGS suffered two fatal accidents (in August and November), both involving Battle TTs. Four crewmen were killed (see Appendix 2 for fatal accident details).

1943 – Peak of Operations

2BAGS strength peaked in June 1943 when it was operating 119 Battles, three Ryans and the Gypsy Moth at a serviceability rate of 78%. Overall personnel strength remained at around 1,100, although this number now included over 100 WAAAFs.

There were two fatal single-aircraft accidents in 1943, resulting in the deaths of five crewmen. Curiously, together with the two accidents from 1942, these all involved TTs, reflecting the risks associated with target-towing. However, the most serious accident involving any RAAF Battles occurred on 27th August 1943, when two Battles (a Mark I and a TT) collided in mid-air. Six men were killed.

Operations began to wind down in the later months of 1943 as Battle serviceability dropped back down to around 50%. At the end of November, 108 Battles, five Ryans and the Gypsy Moth were on strength. Since June 1941, 2BAGS had graduated a total of 3,262 airmen (a handful of whom were naval).

However, while the firing of rifle-calibre machine guns from an open mount in the rear of a Battle may have been a necessary skill in 1940, by late 1943 it had become an obsolete practice. Gunners in modern bombers were more commonly housed in power-operated enclosed turrets. Also, the practice of firing at aerial targets, towed at relatively slow speeds, from largely parallel tracts could not hope to replicate the type of deflection shooting needed against high-speed fighters. Nor was the practice of air-air gunnery free of risk, as evidenced by the accident-prone TTs and the mid-air collision suffered by 2BAGS in August.



*Underside view of Battle Mk1s over Port Pirie
(Port Pirie RAAF Assoc. via SAAM /
Langdon Badger)*

So the end was in sight for 2BAGS. In December, Ansons were received in preparation for the change to an Aerial Observers School, which mainly provided navigation training. Bombing and gunnery operations would cease at Port Pirie. Accordingly, the Battle TTs were sent to the Aerial Gunnery School at West Sale. Then, on 9th December 1943, 2BAGS was formally re-designated 3 Aerial Observers School.

RAAF at Port Pirie Part II: 3 Aerial Observers School 1944-45

In the first weeks of 1944, all of the Battles were sent to air force depots and other units (although some may have been retained for use as ground instructional airframes). By the end of March, 3AOS

listed nil Battles on strength, and 57 Ansons (serviceability 65%), although it apparently also retained the 5 Ryans that had been used by 2BAGS. Personnel strength was 127 officers, 1,143 airmen (including 331 pupils) and 160 airwomen.



RAAF Anson in flight, landing gear down. This is a pre-war photo of A4-34, one of 48 Ansons which received RAAF serials. Around 1,000 Ansons delivered during the war for the EATS retained their RAF serials. (SAAM via Langdon Badger)

Anson numbers peaked in February with 65 on strength, before gradually declining during the course of the year. In July there were 54 Ansons on strength, reducing to 40 in November. Personnel numbers also declined during 1944, to sometimes less than 1,000 in total, presumably as there were fewer duties for 3AOS: its navigation courses did not require the extensive gun and bomb ranges developed by 2BAGS, nor did it need the associated aerial munitions (there are indications that 3AOS Ansons continued to undertake some practice bombing missions, however).

During May, 3AOS received 8 Wackett trainers. However, these do not appear to have been operated beyond September. Meanwhile the 4-5 Ryans regularly appeared on the units' monthly returns, and in October four Tiger Moths were received.

In November 1944, for the first time the 3AOS returns show some details about the flying carried out. For example, on 9th November four Ansons flew the course Crystal Brook – Bute – Brinkworth – Jamestown - Port Augusta - Whyalla before returning to base in a time of 2 hours 30 minutes. Such exercises were routine for the unit.

By the end of 1944, a total of 833 trainees had passed out of 3 AOS since its commencement the previous December. The safety record of the unit had been excellent, with no fatal accidents until the last day of the year when an Anson crashed near Port Pirie. Three of the crew were killed.

Back in April, a peculiar incident occurred when one airman jumped from an Anson in straight and level flight. It was possibly a suicide. Then in May, a Wirraway (not otherwise connected to 3AOS) on a ferry flight to the Northern Territory crashed 120 miles North West of Port Pirie, killing both of the crew. The accident was entered in the 3AOS record book and the two bodies were recovered and buried at Port Pirie Cemetery.

Throughout 1945 and January 1946, 3AOS suffered no more fatal accidents. However during 1945 one officer was buried in Port Pirie cemetery after dying as a result of illness.



Graduation ceremony at RAAF Port Pirie (SAAM via Langdon Badger)

On 31st January 1945 the total personnel strength of 3AOS was 1,071, including 148 WAAAFs. The unit had 44 Ansons, 6 Tiger Moths and, listed as “stored reserves”, 5 Ryans. Operations continued, although at a much reduced pace than in 1944. In the six months to the end of June, just 197 trainees were graduated. As Germany had now surrendered, the need for EATS aircrew was much diminished.

In July 1945, Oxfords (two) were listed as being on strength for the first time. However, in early August, 29 of the Ansons were transferred to “stored reserve”, thus greatly reducing the pool of operational aircraft. Then in the middle of August came the news that hostilities with Japan had ceased. The 3AOS record book says this news was received with “unbounded enthusiasm by all members”!

At the end of the month, the Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Jewell, DFC, wrote that:

“What is going to happen to us?” is on the lips of everybody ... this question will no doubt be answered shortly and to many, 3AOS will soon only be a well treasured memory.

Training operations ceased altogether on 13th October. Many 3AOS personnel were discharged. Those remaining organised sporting activities to pass the time. By the end of October, personnel strength was down to 610, and all base radio facilities had ceased operating. Aircraft strength was 22 Ansons, 5 Tiger Moths and 2 Oxfords, with 52 Ansons in storage.

The shutdown accelerated from that point. By the end of November unit strength was just 148 personnel, with all aircraft except two Ansons in storage. After that unit entries virtually ceased altogether, except a final entry on 31st January 1946 noting "Disbandment of 3 Air Observers School completed".

Peter Ingman

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Appendices

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Schools 1, 2 and 3 Aug 40 - Dec 43

A9186 380 RAAF Unit History sheets (Form A50) [Operations Record Book - Forms A50 and A51] Air Observers School 1 to 3
Apr 40 - Jan 46

SAAM Archives

Appendix I - Aircraft Types Operated by 2BAGS and 3AOS, Port Pirie

CAC Wirraway	small number mainly during 1941
Fairey Battle Mk 1	in excess of 100
Fairey Battle TT	approximately a dozen
De Havilland Tiger Moth	two in 1942; four in 1944
Ryan STM-2 Trainer	as many as six, 1942-1944
Avro Anson*	up to 65
CAC Wackett Trainer	eight in 1944
Airspeed Oxford	two in 1945

* Some sources state that Ansons were operated by 2BAGS. However, this only occurred in late 1943 in preparation for the change to 3AOS. Ansons were not used for regular training operations by 2BAGS.

Appendix 2 - RAAF Port Pirie Fatal Accidents

Some 22 men, listed below, were killed in flying accidents. Thirteen were still teenagers, either 18 or 19 years old (the remainder were aged in their 20s). Where the bodies were recovered, all of these men were buried in Port Pirie Cemetery. A further man, 406981 P/O Edward W Liebeck, 3AOS, (aged 35), died of illness on 3rd April 1945 and is also buried in the cemetery.

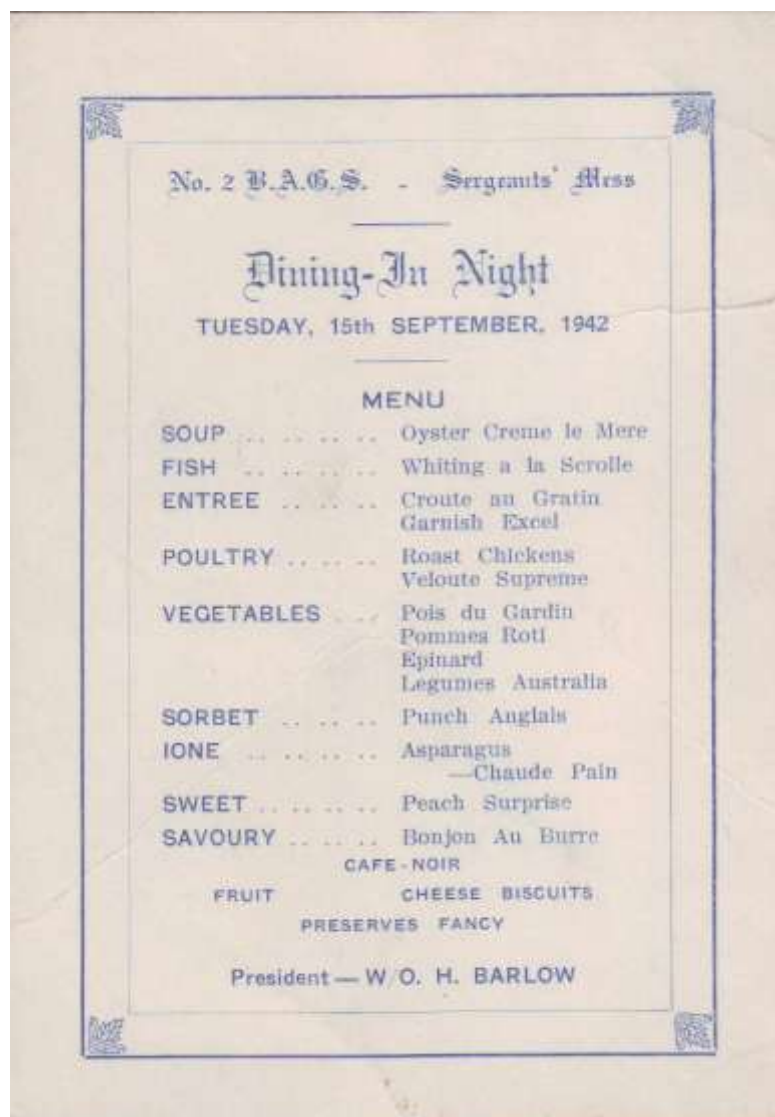
Date	Type	Killed	Details
19 th Feb 1942	P-40E	2Lt Richard E Pingree, USAAF	Aircraft had been grounded with engine problems. Pingree was flight-testing it when a luggage door flew open on finals. The aircraft crashed into the swampy area at the end of the runway and the pilot was killed.
13 th Aug 1942	Battle L5759 TT1	408754 Sgt Reuben M Plummer 38217 LAC Leslie G Price	Aircraft "spun into sea" off Port Pirie at 12pm; bodies not recovered. RAAF report simply states cause of crash as "obscure".
22 nd Nov 1942	Battle TT1 L5760	416617 Sgt Stanley R Scholz 80737 AC1 Douglas Thompson	RAAF Fairey Battle L5760 stalled in a turn and dived into the ground from 300ft at 1630 hours S.A.S.T. about 3.5 miles west of the Port Pirie airfield on 22 November 1942. The pilot and the drogue operator were both killed in this tragic crash. Probable cause "unknown".
20 th May 1943	Battle TT1 L5640	421805 Sgt Lessel J Hampstead 46528 LAC Gordon L Dore 116103 LAC Aloysius P Gilmore	Accident occurred at 0940 hours when a drogue operator was under instruction, and a drogue was being towed. Aircraft was seen to turn on its back and then commence to spin from that position, failing to recover before making contact with the ground. Cause listed as "obscure".
27 th Aug 1943	Battle Mk1 K9380 Battle TT1 L5654	428024 Sgt Robert H Johns 432506 LAC Reginald D Griffith 432548 LAC John D Gardiner 419616 LAC Lewis Grant 423173 Sgt Gordon N Ninness 122157 AC1 Cyril A Venables	Two Battles collided in mid-air during a gunnery exercise at 1430 hours, 10 miles west of Port Pirie. They were TT1 L5654 with a pilot and drogue operator; and Mk1 K9380 with a pilot and three trainee gunners. A "lack of vigilance" was given as the probable cause of the accident. This was the worse Battle accident to occur at any of the BAGSs.
3 rd Sep 1943	Battle L5653 TT1	418770 Sgt Robert A Scott 48013 AC1 Kenneth L Stephen	At 1130 hours the pilot took off with a locking chock still on starboard aileron. The aircraft climbed to approx. 400 feet and then dropped the starboard wing, turned on its back and dived almost vertically into the ground. The aircraft caught fire and was almost completely burned. The accident was one mile north west of Port Pirie aerodrome. Cause was "carelessness or negligence".
20 th Apr 1944	Anson MG216	442320 LAC Horace D Armstrong	Accident occurred at 1045 hours, 35 miles from Kyancutta. Whilst the aircraft was in straight and level flight at 3500 feet, LAC Armstrong wearing a parachute harness and Mae West, but no parachute pack, jumped from the aircraft. The body was eventually found and returned to Port Pirie for burial.
27 th May 1944	Wirraway A20-634	416999 Flt Sgt George F Quinn 409406 Flt Sgt John J Hayes	Issued 457 Sqn RAAF ex 7SFTS 25/05/44. Accident 1113hrs 27/05/44 when the aircraft crashed at Island Lagoon, a salt pan some 120 miles north west of Port Augusta, South Australia, whilst on route to Strauss Strip NT whilst being flown by 1AD Test and Ferry Flight Crew. During this part of ferry flight, due to low cloud ceiling of 1000feet, the pilot tried to come down below mist at 450 feet. The aircraft had appeared to impact inverted. The crew, W/O George Frederick Quinn Serv#416999 (Ex 775qn P-40 pilot in 1943) and F/Sgt J.J. Hayes Serv#409406 were both killed. Both buried at Port Pirie Cemetery.
31 st Dec 1944	Anson MG217	416282 FO Sven R Polgreen 438964 LAC Robert B McCallum 435332 LAC Lawrence G Campbell	At 1040 hours the port wing sheared off outboard of port nacelle fairing after a very steep turn to starboard. The aircraft crashed 2 ¾ miles north of Port Pirie. F/O Sven Robert Polgreen (Wireless Air Gunner), LACs Lawrence Gordon Campbell and Robert Bruce McCallum (trainees) all killed. Sgt Mervyn John Kingsman (pilot) seriously injured. Cause was listed as "probably due to excessive loading during turning manoeuvres". Kingsman was detailed to fly the aircraft on a navigational training exercise taking off at 0745 hours, Sunday 31 st December 1944. Polgreen was the second pilot while Campbell and McCallum were trainee navigators. At about 1020 hours, with the exercise having been completed, the aircraft was seen carrying out unusual flying manoeuvres over the township of Port Pirie.



2BAGS Magazine cover (SAAM archives)



2BAGS Letterhead (SAAM archives)



2BAGS Dining-In Menu (SAAM archives)

Sir Ivor Henry Thomas Hele, CBE (13 June 1912 – 2 December 1993) was an Australian artist noted for portraiture. He was Australia's longest serving war artist and completed more commissioned works than any other in the history of Australian art. (Wikipedia)

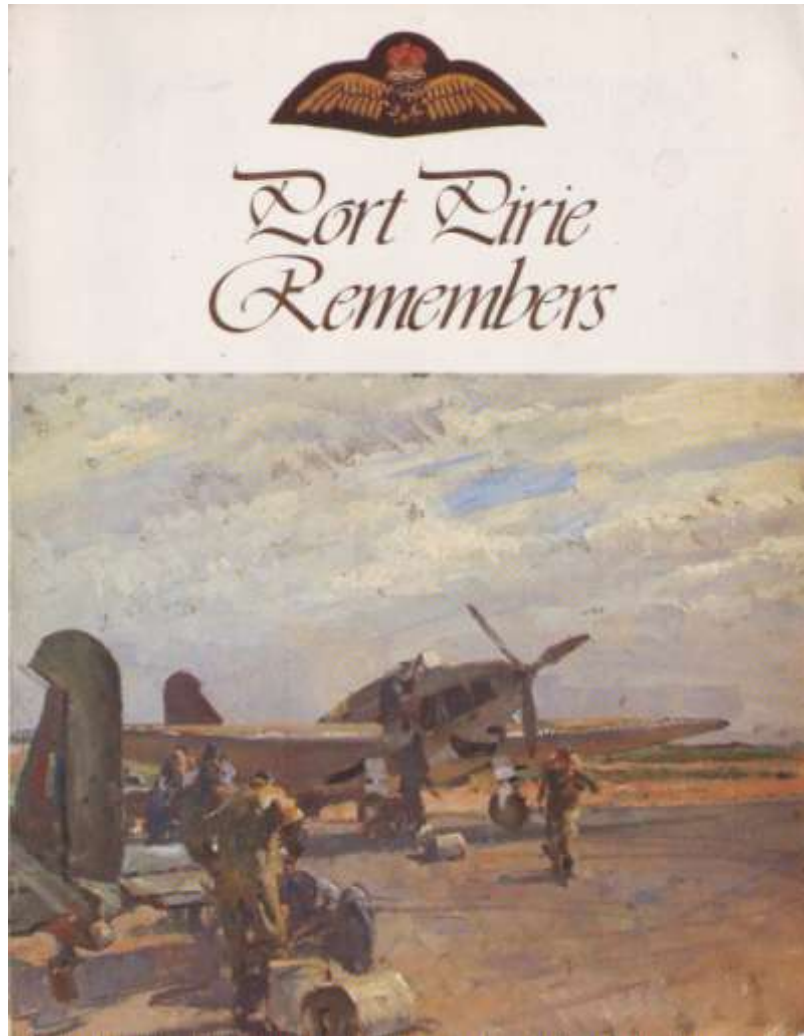
Hele spent time at 2BAGS, Port Pirie, in 1942 and produced a number of artworks featuring Fairey Battles and EATS airmen.



Flight Sergeant Duncan McLachlan, Port Pirie, in the gunner's position in a Fairey Battle (Ivor Hele, AWM ART21929)



The AWM caption is: "Depicts a portrait of Flight Lieutenant Gerald Trevor 'Jerry' Major, No 54 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, Port Pirie, South Australia". This is a very rare mention of the largely undocumented 54 (Reserve) Squadron. (Ivor Hele, AWM ART 23734)



Cover of the Port Pirie Remembers book (Port Pirie City Council, 1982) featuring an oil painting of a Fairey Battle by Ivor Hele.

Appendix 4 - Port Pirie Aerodrome in 2017



One of the wartime runways still in use, although much narrower than the 45 metre width utilised during the war. (Peter Ingman)

Since the war, the Port Pirie (civil) Aerodrome has been located at the site of the former wartime RAAF base, a short distance south of the town. While the largest wartime runway was (inexplicably) destroyed some decades ago, most of the runways and taxiways utilise the same aerodrome surfaces constructed for the RAAF (and the original drainage system is still functioning).

During the war, there were 17 Bellman hangars at Port Pirie. The concrete floors can still be seen. One of these 17 was retained, and remains in use today as the home for around a dozen privately-owned light aircraft.



Wartime Bellman hangar, still in use at Port Pirie Aerodrome. (Peter Ingman)

All of the wartime buildings have long since been removed. Just two structures are still visible, a small brick pump-house once used for the swimming pool, and a large concrete building that is presumably too sturdy to destroy easily. It is a three-sided structure used as a range to calibrate aircraft machine guns.



The wartime concrete structure at Port Pirie aerodrome (Peter Ingman).



The remains of an (unidentified) Anson, recovered from a local farm, were placed inside the concrete structure some years ago. Although badly worn, the Anson nose structure retains its yellow wartime paint scheme. (Peter Ingman)

The aerodrome office contains a display of wartime photos, many of which have been re-produced elsewhere. Any other wartime artefacts in respect to the RAAF base have been sent to the military museum operated by the Port Pirie RSL. This is largely an army-themed museum, although there is a small RAAF exhibit. Pride of place is a beautifully restored UH-1H “Huey” helicopter.



Huey helicopter A2-489 on display at the Port Pirie Military Museum.

Appendix 5 - Fairey Battle Mark 1 N2188 “The SAAM Battle”

One of 370 Fairey Battles delivered to Australia, N2188 (a Mark 1) was built in 1939. It served with a RAF Operational Training Unit before being crated up for shipment to Australia. In June 1941 it was received by the RAAF's 1 Aircraft Park at Geelong, where it was assembled before being sent to 2BAGS at Port Pirie in September.

It can be presumed that N2188 was as hard worked as any of the 2BAGS Battles over a period of twenty-one months of service. In August 1942, it had suffered a forced-landing into the sea, but – perhaps surprisingly - it was recovered and returned to service. The following year, on 7th May 1943, N2188 made another forced-landing, this time on the coast among mangroves near Port Davis, 16 kilometres west of the RAAF base.

After recovery of some components by RAAF personnel, the aircraft would lie undisturbed for over thirty years.

The story resumes in the early 1970s when Pearce Dunn was searching the area for aircraft parts, for the Warbirds Aviation Museum at Mildura. He was able to recover various Battle components that had been dumped around the base and surrounds. Pearce also heard stories of a crashed Battle, and an aircraft researcher from Adelaide, David Vincent, began to investigate further.



Pearce Dunn recovering aircraft components at Port Davis, 1973 (David Vincent via Nigel Daw)

A former 2BAGS instructor, Alf Whittle, confirmed to Vincent that a Battle had crashed-landed and was never recovered. More importantly he also remembered the name of the pilot, Charles Sadler. After some detective work involving the Electoral Roll, Vincent tracked down Sadler in Tasmania. Sadler confirmed the story by letter:

Alf Whittle was right – it was me who crash-landed the aircraft (Fairey Battle 2188) on May 7th 1943. The aircraft's airframe was still intact except for the undercarriage which was wiped off on impact. Certain small pieces were salvaged by ground staff who went to the site by crash launch, but what they took I do not know.

Sadler mentioned that the crash was caused by a broken connecting rod which cut through the sump, causing an oil leak and subsequent loss of power (although the aircraft card says a glycol leak was the problem). Luckily, the pilot and three trainees onboard were not badly injured.

However, after receiving this confirmation of the incident from Sadler, a subsequent trip to the area by four enthusiasts (optimistically towing a 20 foot trailer), failed to find any trace of the aircraft. The trip only served to confirm the area was very large and difficult to access.

In February 1974 Vincent was able to get the local Port Pirie newspaper, *The Recorder*, interested in the story. Subsequently, drawing on a pool of local knowledge, searches were undertaken. On 11th March 1974 the wreck was spotted from the air, probably for the first time since the 1940s. It was located in a small clearing, surrounded by mangroves and on the seawards side of the high water line. Two men from *The Recorder* were then able to reach the site using motorcycles.



Port Davis mangrove area in 1982, which is where N2188 was found. Port Pirie can be seen in the distance (Nigel Daw).

Although excited about the find, the wreck was not complete. The engine had been removed as well as the tail assembly. Indeed, another local had come forward with more information. This was Norm Meadows, a boilermaker from the lead and zinc smelter who had been a sergeant airframe fitter at Port Pirie. Meadows had been part of the 1943 salvage party which reached N2188 by boat, using the morning high tide. Then as the tide dropped it was possible to work on the wreck for several hours. Over several days the aircraft was stripped of various salvageable fittings, and a tripod was setup to winch out the engine. On high tide a barge was brought underneath to remove it. The tail section was also removed in this fashion. Under orders to destroy what they couldn't salvage, the men poured petrol over the wreck and used a flare pistol to set it alight. Meadows saw the plane ablaze as he left the site for the final time.

Clearly some major effort would be needed to remove the wreck. It took a year to make detailed plans, including getting permission to remove mangroves surrounding N2188. In 1975 further site visits were made. In due course as many as 12 people were involved in the recovery. This involved separating the wreck into various components (wings and fuselage), which were cleaned of mud and then floated out on high tides. It was not until 1976 that the recovery was completed and N2188 was transported to Mildura.

The entire process has been recorded through the photographs of Nigel Daw.



N2188 in March 1974, when reached for the first time since the 1940s. (J Smith via N Daw)



Wing section, June 1974 – firmly settled in mud. (N Daw)



Battle recovery, March 1975. By this time mangroves had been cleared to expose the wreck, and it was gradually dug out of the mud. Wearing "Operation Battle N2188" T-shirts are Nigel Daw (beer in hand), Kevin Gogler and David Vincent (N Daw).



April 1976, recovery of part of the fuselage (N Daw)



April 1976: a wing is floated on a pontoon and towed by a dinghy (N Daw).



September 1976: after interim storage at Port Pirie airport, the wreck is loaded onto a trailer for transport to Mildura. The sign on the end of the fuselage reads "Warbirds Aviation Museum Mildura". (N Daw)



September 1976: arrival at Warbirds Aviation Museum, Mildura. The sign on the end of the trailer reads "Operation Battle N2188 for Warbirds Aviation Museum Mildura". (N Daw)



1988: N2188 on display at SAAM, Port Adelaide. (N Daw)

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