

Richmond Valley Council

Evans Head Memorial Aerodrome

Plan of Management

June 2005



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Executive Summary

The Evans Head Memorial Aerodrome is located within the northern NSW coastal town of Evans Head. Evans Head lies at approximately 720 kilometres north of Sydney and 240 kilometres south of Brisbane on the Evans River.

The Evans Head Memorial Aerodrome has historical and social significance. The aerodrome was built in the 1930s by Woodburn Shire Council. In 1937 the Commonwealth resumed the aerodrome for defence purposes. The airfield was modernised and used to train 11,000 ground and air crew for the Royal Air Force above what Australia needed for homeland protection as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme.

At its height, the Bombing and Gunnery Schools had some 70 Fairey Battle Aircraft and the extensive bombing and gunnery ranges established to the north and south of the village of Evans Head were in daily active use. In addition to the on-base training, Wirraway and Anson aircraft flew in from Amberley RAAF Base in Queensland for bombing and gunnery practice. The Bombing and Gunnery School trained 5,500 RAAF personnel up to December 1943, most courses being of one month's duration.

In December 1943 the Bombing and Gunnery School was disbanded and the No. 1 Air Observers School was transferred from Cootamundra to Evans Head in the same month. The Air Observers School trained 630 crewmen before the end of the war. The Empire Air Training Scheme program came to an end in June 1944.

In June 1945 the Air Observers School left Evans Head, and a Care and Maintenance Unit was established, which maintained the base until August 1947, when it was transferred to the Department of Civil Aviation.

Removal of buildings from the airfield took place through the 1950s. The hangars were dismantled and taken away on trucks, while the timber huts were sawn into sections and moved on trucks, or dragged on log sledges. Following WW II the aerodrome was used for commercial airline services, Butler Air Transport operating there from about 1947, but during the mid-fifties the aerodrome was closed to commercial flights and its activities were transferred to Casino. In 1985 the main runway was lengthened to allow the aerodrome to be used for commercial services for about a six-month period while the Casino aerodrome was being upgraded.

The Department of Defence handed over the aerodrome to the Department of Transport in 1952. In 1992 ownership of the aerodrome was passed to Richmond River Shire Council from the Department Of Transport under an Airport Local Ownership Plan agreement. The Department of Transport does not appear to have undertaken regular maintenance of the one surviving Bellman hangar, so Council inherited a structure that had been gradually decaying for 40 years. Council has since downgraded the 'flying' status of the aerodrome but it is still used by many different types of aircraft. It is currently the site of the annual Great Eastern Fly-In for aviators from around Australia, a landing ground for emergency services and other private aviators.

Most of the WWII airfields were not transferred to active civil use after the war, and runways were not maintained. Evans Head was one of the few maintained after the war, and the runways, apart from recent shortening of one and the lengthening of another 1985, are intact with varying degree of surface deterioration.

In this context the Evans Head Aerodrome stands out as one of the important WWII airfields, both in the context of Empire Air Training Scheme and the overall wartime defence establishment. The scale of the base's operations is demonstrated by the four surviving runways and associated taxiways and tarred hangar aprons.

The site contains one original Bellman Hangar of 17 originally built at Evans Head. The surviving Bellman hangar is a good example of an innovative approach to wartime needs, and was one of the first erected and is one of a few intact and in situ examples in Australia.

The Evans Head Memorial Aerodrome was used after the war as a regional commercial aerodrome, and subsequently as a recreational aerodrome, a use that continues today. The continued association of the place with aviation activities is an integral part of its significance, and is a use that greatly enhances the recognition and understanding of its historical associations.

The site has social significance for the many ex RAAF and WAAAF service-men and -women who were associated with the aerodrome, civilian workers, local families and friends of people who served there and died during WWII. The site is used for ANZAC Day celebrations, and occasional reunions and celebrators events for those associated with the place's history. Moreover it is significant to the people of Evans Head because of the central role it played in the development of the village during and after the war, and because of the military presence in and above the village, which continues on a daily basis in the use of the Southern Bombing Range. The aerodrome is a substantial landmark in Evans Head, from the ground and from the air.

The aerodrome has aesthetic significance because of its landmark qualities. Its sheer size as an open grassland area crossed by runways gives it a powerful sense of place when viewed from elevated viewpoints or the air, and its proximity to the Evans Head village and the coastline emphasise its strategic location and the scale of the RAAF Base during the war. It is one of the few remaining large coastal sites that retains some sense of wartime operations.

Constraints

The major constraints that determine future development options include the following:

- The heritage values for which the place was listed;
- The natural values that currently exist;
- SEPP 14 Wetland;
- The bush fire prone land;
- The Australian Noise Exposure Forecast; and
- The obstacle limitation surface.

Heritage

Implications

A number of implications for future management arise directly from the Statement of Significance. These implications are based on the desire to protect and conserve aspects of the place that are of cultural significance, a desire firmly reinforced by the requirements imposed by the listing of the place in the State Heritage Register.

The implications that arise for future management from the Statement of Significance are:

- ▶ The form and layout of the surviving four runways, taxiways and hangar apron areas are significant and should be conserved. The historical significance is about their layout and ability to be read in the landscape, rather than in the detail of their surface finish.
- ▶ The surviving Bellman hangar is significant in its own right. Given the poor condition of parts of the hangar fabric, restoration and reconstruction works are necessary to ensure its ongoing survival and effective use.
- ▶ The current and ongoing aviation use of the aerodrome is part of its significance and should be continued. The existing paved surface of Runway 18/36 is appropriate for current level of use and should be maintained. The other runways will be maintained as clear strips in the landscape.
- ▶ The historical and social associations of the aerodrome are not apparent to the uninformed visitor, and should be the subject of interpretation at the site and in Evans Head village.
- ▶ The ability of community groups with close associations with the aerodrome (such as veterans groups and the local community) to hold commemorative events and meetings at the aerodrome should be retained.

Natural Conservation Values

A flora and fauna assessment undertaken by Peter Parker for the site found that the northern portion of the airfield contains similar conservation values to land within Broadwater National Park (Parker 2001: 47). At a meeting on Tuesday 21 May 2002, Richmond Valley Council recommended that Council support the heritage listing of the Evans Head Aerodrome, subject to a number of number of conditions, one of which was:

- ▶ “The area of land identified within the report (Parker 2001) as having similar conservation values to land within Broadwater National Park be excluded from future development”

Implications

The northern portion of the site has been identified by Council as land that should be protected from further development.

SEPP 14 Wetland

The wetland in the northern portion of the site is gazetted SEPP 14 Wetland No. 132.

Implications

SEPP 14 Wetland No. 132 is protected by State Environmental Planning Policy No. 14, and should be conserved because it is an important natural environment.

Bushfire Prone Land

Pursuant to the Bushfire Prone Land Maps prepared by Richmond Valley Council for Evans Head the majority of the site is considered to be bushfire prone land given the amount of vegetation within and surrounding the site.

Implications

The implications of the majority of the site being classified as bushfire prone land is that the southern portion of the site is the only land available for any type of future development considered to be consistent with the future management of the Aerodrome.

Australian Noise Exposure Forecasts (ANEF)

The Australian Standard AS2021 provides recommended land use compatibility for ANEF contours. ANEF contours are used to provide guidance for land use planning. ANEF contours indicate the suitability of various land uses near an aerodrome.

Implications

Areas outside the 20 ANEF contour are considered suitable for residential development. Areas of land located between the 20 ANEF and 25 ANEF are considered to be conditionally appropriate for residential development. Areas contained by the 25 ANEF are considered incompatible with residential development.

The Obstacle Limitation Surfaces (OLS)

The OLS define the lower limits of airspace, centred on the aerodrome and/or associated with the runways, which is required to allow the safe manoeuvring of aircraft on arrival or departure from the aerodrome.

The Bellman Hangar

The adoption of one of the options listed in the Bellman Hangar Report (Appendix F) is necessary to address safety and high risk of structural failure.

Development Potential

Development within the Northern Hangar Area

The Northern Hangar Area contains significant evidence of the hangar locations and associated tarred aprons. The Northern Hangar Area has been identified by the

heritage consultant as being appropriate for future development pursuant to the following principles.

- ▶ Any future buildings in this area should be contained within the footprints of the former hangars, and should not entail the removal or destruction of the apron areas (though resurfacing may be permitted if a new use requires adjacent hard paving).
- ▶ The form, orientation, external building materials and as far as possible scale of any buildings located within the aerodrome Northern Hangar Area should be sympathetic to those of the surviving Bellman hangar, the objective being to echo the rhythm and scale of the WWII built form and evoke the aviation associations.
- ▶ Building should not be permitted west of the alignment of the western walls of the former hangars.

Development within the Southern Hangar Area and taxiway area

The Southern Hangar Area and taxiway area have been identified by the heritage consultant as being appropriate for future development pursuant to the following principles.

- ▶ The Southern Hangar Area (relating to the 11 southern hangar sites and aprons) may be redeveloped for light industrial use or rezoned residential subject to any proposed redevelopment incorporating the existing footprints of the aerodrome into the proposal. Buildings should be large to reflect the previous scale of the zone.

Development within the South-eastern Hangar Area

The South-eastern Hangar Area and taxiway area have been identified by the heritage consultant as being appropriate for future development pursuant to the following principles.

- ▶ The area immediately south-west of the former hangar area, bound by Woodburn and Currajong Streets, containing the surviving southern taxiway and the abandoned southern end of runway 14/32, may be developed for residential purposes subject to any proposed redevelopment incorporating the remaining footprints of the former aerodrome into the proposal.