

RETURN OF THE CATBOAT TO "THE COUNTRY CLUB"

Rathmines on the shores of Lake Macquarie was once considered a prime posting for RAAF personnel. Just ask any of the thousands who passed that way during the years 1939 to 1961.

At its prime, during World War Two, numbers ranged up to two thousand and occasionally to over three thousand Airmen and WAAAF, led by a series of highly respected Commanding Officers.

Many a happy smile appeared on the faces of those personnel learning they were off to "Cohen's Country Club", a case of no more dusty airfields and with "The Burma Road" measured in yards not miles.

With the entry of Japan into the War late in 1941, followed by the attack on Darwin, a stock take of the available aircraft needed to defend the country, disclosed a most serious situation. Competent fighter aircraft were virtually non-existent and bombers and transports stated to be Two Hudson squadrons, two Transport squadrons, nine Catalinas and sundry other types. By no means an adequate air force considered capable of holding back the might of the opposition on our doorstep. How things were to change from those humble beginnings to the RAAF build up that occurred in the four years which followed.

In all, one hundred and sixty eight Catalinas were flown here from San Diego to Rathmines, where armour plating, self-sealing within fuel tanks, and if fitted, the retractable undercarriage were all removed to achieve an increase in bomb load from 2000 lbs to 4000 lbs, the same as that carried by the Flying Fortress (B17E).

The first Catalina to arrive in Australia was only the third aircraft ever, to cross the Pacific Ocean from East to West.

Cruising speed of the Catalina was, in general terms ninety to one hundred knots. Its flight endurance, up to and some times exceeded twenty four hours. The latter characteristic created their role as the RAAF's Very Long Range Bombing and Mine Laying Force. No other particular aircraft type was operated by the RAAF in this role, for all of the four years, of the war against Japan.

They were not particularly heavily armed, carrying two Browning .303 machine guns in the nose turret, one



Catalina departing Rathmines early 1945

Browning .5 machine gun in each of the waist blisters and one .303 machine gun in the turret. Most bombing and mine laying operations were timed to have the aircraft over enemy held territory during the hours of darkness, thereby making considerable demands on the Navigators. The long flights were aided and abetted by four bunks a two burner stove, and hopefully a crewman who could cook.

Australian Catalinas were highly commended by Gen. MacArthur for their efficiency in the field of mine laying. In this role Catalinas operated on a total of 281 different nights against 52 different targets with a total of 1130 sorties and laying 2512 mines between 23rd April, 1943 and 31st July, 1945 (source, RAAF Report on Minelaying Operations, released after the 30 year time lapse.)

The foregoing is only part of the Catalina story, other ventures, involved many bombing sorties, deployment and retrieval of Coast Watcher and Z Force personnel behind enemy lines, Air/sea rescues involving open ocean landings and take off, plus reconnaissance and the discovery of Japanese invasion fleets on three occasions, which led to the battles of The Coral and Bismarck Seas, and Midway.

Having achieved the listing of the Rathmines Base site on the NSW State Heritage Register, our present endeavours are to achieve National Listing and the reconstruction of one of the old hangars. This Museum /Hangar to contain a Catalina recently acquired in Portugal, together with a volume of memorabilia of both the Catalina Association and the Lake Macquarie District Historical Society. The Society is to collate and prepare the exhibits and provide staffing on the open days, initially each weekend and possibly more frequently later. Learning from history is vitally important to coming generations as is remembering the feats of those who gave their lives to retain our Australian way of life.

Like many ventures of this type we seek funding in the order of \$1,000,000, plus the blessing of the owners, The Lake Macquarie City Council, who have been particularly supportive for many years. All donations will be tax deductible, greatly appreciated and recorded in the Hangar. For further information please contact:-
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The Rathmines Catalina Memorial Park Trust Fund.
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