



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

(PART BLOCK 25 AND 26 SECTION 72; PART BLOCK 33 SECTION 73; PART BLOCK 6 SECTION 76, DICKSON)

At its meeting of 1 April 2021 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Original Canberra Aerodrome was not eligible for provisional registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Original Canberra Aerodrome against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

HISTORY

The Original Canberra Aerodrome was the first official aviation facility in the ACT and the location of Canberra's first air fatalities. It became operational in 1924, but remained so for a relatively short period of time, with a decision to move the aerodrome being made in 1926.

At the time that the Original Canberra Aerodrome was operational the territory and city were in relative infancy. The Federal Capital Territory (not known as the Australian Capital Territory until 1938) was formed on the 1 January 1911. On 12 March 1913, the city of Canberra was founded and officially named. A proposed location for an aerodrome was included on a plan from Canberra City and its environs published in 1922 (Griffin 1922; Image 2). This was located not too far from the eventual location of the Original Canberra Aerodrome. During the operational period of the Original Canberra Aerodrome the Commonwealth parliament was still based in Melbourne and did not move to Canberra until 9 May 1927. In fact, the impending move of the federal government was one reason that prompted the closure of the Original Canberra Aerodrome and the creation of new and expanded facilities in the Majura Valley.

The aerodrome was constructed at a time of rapid expansion in aviation across Australia in the aftermath of World War I. Veteran pilots of the Australian Flying Corp operating in WWI returned to Australia with the knowledge they had gained about flying and their enthusiasm combined with the many aircraft brought back from the war fuelled the initial development of air services (Brogden, 1960). Initially flying was unregulated, but in 1920 Colonel Brinsmead was appointed as an independent Controller of Civil Aviation and other policies were implemented to regulate flying. This led to the Department of Home and Territories purchasing selected sites in capital cities and proposed stopping places. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) was founded, as a separate defence force from the army and navy, in 1921 but remained relatively small for many years. Around 1924 a period of long-range flights began to demonstrate air capabilities, it has been stated that this was "probably the most important single development in post-war Australian aviation history because of the effect the flights had en masse on the public mind" (Brogden, 1960). It is concurrent with these developments around the rest of Australia that the Original Canberra Aerodrome became operational. Although Canberra was a very small and young town, which did not directly link into many of the aforementioned developments in aviation, it was a time of considerable public interest in aviation.

Site Selection

In October 1921 the Defence Department wrote to the Home and Territories Department saying that provisions needed to be made for a civil aerodrome in Canberra and requested that the necessary area be set aside in a location selected by the Superintendent of Aerodromes (Image 3; NAA: A1, 1931/1751). In response, the Minister for Home and Territories expressed the view that a more suitable location for the aerodrome be found that would not interfere with the city design.

A memorandum from the Secretary of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee to the Director-General of Works dated 5th July 1922 indicates that further discussions regarding the provision of grounds for aviation facilities in Canberra had commenced (NAA: A199, FC1924/447).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

A trip by Colonel Owen to select an aerodrome site was announced by the Prime Minister, Mr Bruce, on 13 Feb 1923 following a meeting of the Federal Cabinet. On the 15 Feb 1923, Colonel Owen (Federal Director of Works) flew from Melbourne to Canberra with Sgd. E. C. Johnson (Superintendent of Aerodromes) to select a site for the new aerodrome. This trip received considerable coverage in the national newspapers (Appendix 1). It was the first plane to fly from Melbourne to Canberra (some newspapers reported that it was the first to land in Canberra). It was forced to descend at Wangaratta due to bushfire smoke before successfully reaching Canberra.

Soon after the trip by Owen and Johnson (2 March 1923), the Department of Defence identified the selected area in a Memorandum to the Department of Home and Territories. On 10 May 1923 the Secretary of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee sent a letter to the Minister of Works and Railways recommending a large area between Majura and Northbourne Avenues be set aside, as shown in Plan No. A. C. 446 (Image 4; NAA: A199, FC1924/447; NAA: A1, 1931/1751). The Commonwealth Surveyor-General also confirmed there were no difficulties with the selected site and approved it to be set aside for the aerodrome.

On 28 March 1924 Sgd. E. C. Johnson provided a report to the Controller of Civil Aviation stating that he had selected an appropriate area for marking (NAA: A199, FC1924/447). A letter from Colonel Owen to the Secretary of the Department of Defence dated 12 May 1924 indicates that the necessary preparation and marking of the site had been completed by the Department of Works.

A contour map of the aerodrome site was published on 11 September 1926 (Image 8). However, this was only completed when plans for establishing a new aerodrome were already well advanced.

Aeroplane Crash

Canberra's first aviation fatalities occurred at the Original Canberra Aerodrome and were related to the operations of the No. 3 Squadron RAAF. The crash of the plane, a de Havilland 9 A6-28 owned by the Defence Department and operated by No. 3 Squadron RAAF out of Richmond aerodrome, occurred on Thursday, 11 February 1926 at about 10:30am (NAA: A1, 1926/3472; Images 5-7 show original photographs of the wreckage). The crash claimed the lives of Flying Officer Philip Mackenzie Pitt and Aircraftsman AC1 William Edward Callander.

The pilot, Flying Officer Philip McKenzie Pitt, was killed upon impact (NAA: A9300, PITT P M). He was 27 years old at the time of the accident, unmarried and originally from Queensland. He graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon in December 1920. He did 12 months training at the Royal Artillery in England, followed by one and a half years at the Royal Garrison Artillery in Sydney. He was afterwards attached to Royal Australian Air Force. He graduated as a pilot on October 31, 1925 and was then assigned to the No. 3 Squadron. He was buried in the Roman Catholic section of the Queanbeyan General Cemetery. A memorial mass was also held St Monica's, Richmond.

Pitt's passenger, Aircraftsman AC1 William Edward Callander, was a photographer and 26 years old at the time of the accident (NAA: A9301, 370). He was married with two children. He was initially saved from the burning wreckage by a ploughman, Walter Johnson, but died from his injuries that same day in hospital. He was buried at St John the Baptist's, Canberra.

The aforementioned, Walter Johnson, later provided evidence to the coroner and the defence inquest (NAA: A9300, PITT P M; NAA: A9301, 370). He was awarded a Humane Society medal for his efforts in attempting to save Mr Callander from the burning wreckage (see Appendix 1).

The aim of the flight had been to undertake an aerial photographic survey of the Murrumbidgee River on behalf of the Federal Capital Commission. A second aircraft, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Hepburn (Director of Works and Buildings, RAAF) with Mr Moss as passenger, landed safely before the accident. He was waiting for Pitt and Callander to arrive and observed the accident from a distance. The engine appeared to be running normally. However, the plane stalled, when landing, only 100 feet above the ground and spun, nose to the ground where it burst into flames. The fire was extinguished upon the arrival of the Canberra Fire Brigade.

A hearing by the district coroner, John Gale, on 12 February 1926 found that the disaster was caused by an error of judgement on the part of the pilot.

News of the accident quickly spread and there was considerable official interest, as well as coverage in the nation's newspapers (Appendix 1). Questions were asked of the Minister of Defence in the House of Representatives regarding

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

the accident on the same day (Hansard in NAA: A1, 1926/3472, p8). An official enquiry was announced by the Defence Department in the immediate aftermath of the crash. The day after the crash the safety of the aeroplane was raised as a point of discussion in the House of Representatives, by Mr Makin (Rep. for S.A.) (Hansard in NAA: A1, 1926/3472). He requested further assurances that everything had been done to ensure the safety of the pilots a week later (17 February 1926) and further comments were made by Sir Neville Howse defending the safety record and giving details as to the pilot error involved. The results of the official inquest (contained in NAA: A9300, PITT P M) were announced by the Minister of Defence, Sir Neville Howse, in the House of Representatives on 11 March 1926 in response to Mr Makin's questions (Hansard in NAA: A1, 1926/3472). The court found that the aeroplane was safe and adequately maintained (NAA: A9300, PITT P M; NAA: A9301, 370). Furthermore, the crash was the result of an error of judgement by the pilot that caused the engine to stall and no blame was attachable to anyone.

This crash occurred early in the history of the RAAF and there had only been two prior air fatalities within this force, although there were at least five others in the year to follow (Appendix 1). The No. 3 Squadron RAAF maintains a website commemorating the accident and the lives lost (https://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/Canberra_Survey_%20Sacrifice.htm).

Decision to move aerodrome from original location

The Original Canberra Aerodrome was only operational for a period of two years. In 1926 the aerodrome site was deemed unsatisfactory and a new site was selected by the controller of civil aviation, Lieut. Colonel Brinsmead, at the corner of Majura Valley road and Duntroon-Queanbeyan Road (Appendix 1). The main problem with the Original Aerodrome Site appears to have been that it could not be approached from the south and east due to its close proximity to Mt Ainslie. The new site had a greater landing distance in all directions, not less than 1000 yards. The plans for the Opening of Parliament in Canberra and the associated visit of the Duke of York were driving factors behind the selection of a new aerodrome site in order to adequately accommodate the Air Force unit during the royal visit (NAA: A1, 1931/1751, pgs 65-91; Appendix 1). The site selected for the new aerodrome in 1926 in the Majura Valley is part of the land still occupied by Canberra Airport.

Later Developments of the Site of the Original Canberra Aerodrome

After the aerodrome was moved the land that it occupied reverted to a pastoral lease. In the 1950s the city of Canberra expanded onto the location of the Original Canberra Aerodrome and the suburb of Dickson was constructed. Possible fragments of the ring marker are visible in aerial imagery from 1950 and 1958 in the form of an arc-shaped object but, if present, this must have been removed in subsequent years (Extent, 2020a).

Historical interest in the Original Canberra Aerodrome has endured. On 16 November 2019 Jane Goffman, a town planner based in Canberra and member of the Council of the National Trust of Australia (ACT), in association with James Oglethorpe, Website Coordinator for No. 3 Squadron RAAF Association, presented the history of the Original Canberra Aerodrome at the Australia ICOMOS Heritage of the Air Conference. A paper was subsequently published in the Canberra Historical Journal (Goffman, 2020). As part of their collaboration a digitised version of the contours of the aerodrome was added to the Historic Plans available on ACTmapi (<https://app.actmapi.act.gov.au/actmapi/index.html?viewer=hp>).

Following a proposal by Housing ACT to develop an area thought to be adjacent to the original ring marker location, a professional investigation was done to confirm if it was intact (Extent, 2020a; 2020b). No physical evidence for the ring marker was uncovered.

The location of the Original Canberra Aerodrome is commemorated on a plaque located at the Dickson Library. Canberra Tracks signage with also be installed in April 2021 explaining the historical significance of the Original Canberra Aerodrome and the crash that occurred there.

DESCRIPTION

During its operational phase the Original Canberra Aerodrome site consisted of an open field, with a central ring marker and four lockspits designating the corners of the landing area. These were all made of concrete and whitewashed to increase visibility.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

Physical condition and integrity

The nomination refers to the locations of the central ring and two of the four lockspits (the others are presumed to have been destroyed during construction in the suburb of Dickson). As described in the History section of this Background Information, the physical remains have been significantly disturbed, removed or destroyed over the years. At the time of the nomination it was thought that the central ring may still be partially intact. However, subsequent sub-surface archaeological investigations did not reveal any intact structure (Extent, 2020b). Consequently, there is no evident remains of the central ring marker, nor three of the four lockspits. It is possible that a small remnant of Lockspit A is intact due to the presence of concrete rubble at the location (Image 9).

The Original Canberra Aerodrome is of enduring historical interest as the first official aviation facility in the development of the region. However, only the remains of one lockspit fragment are known to exist. It is possible that more of this could be located underground and that there may also be subsurface remnants belonging to Lockspit B. However, as shown by the investigations of the central ring, it is probable that any potential remains are substantially disturbed. Therefore, it is unlikely that on their own any fragmentary remnants would meet the thresholds for inclusion in the ACT Heritage Register. Moreover, the context of what remains today within the suburban infrastructure of Dickson is substantially altered to what would have been the original context, thus diminishing any potential interpretation of its significance.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

SITE PLAN



Image 1 Original Canberra Aerodrome site boundary

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

IMAGES

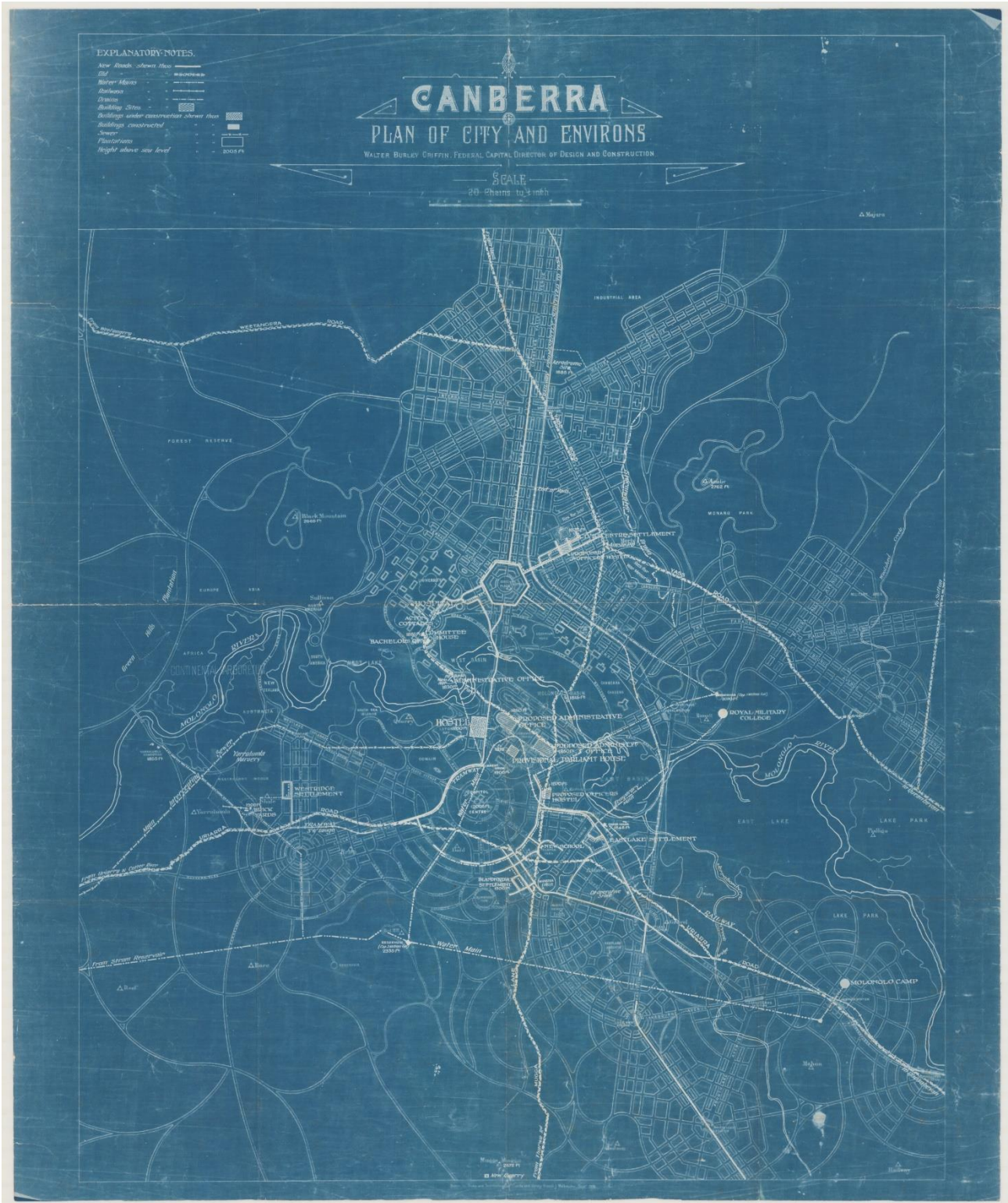


Image 2: Plan of Canberra City and Environs indicating a possible future location for an aerodrome (Griffin 1922).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

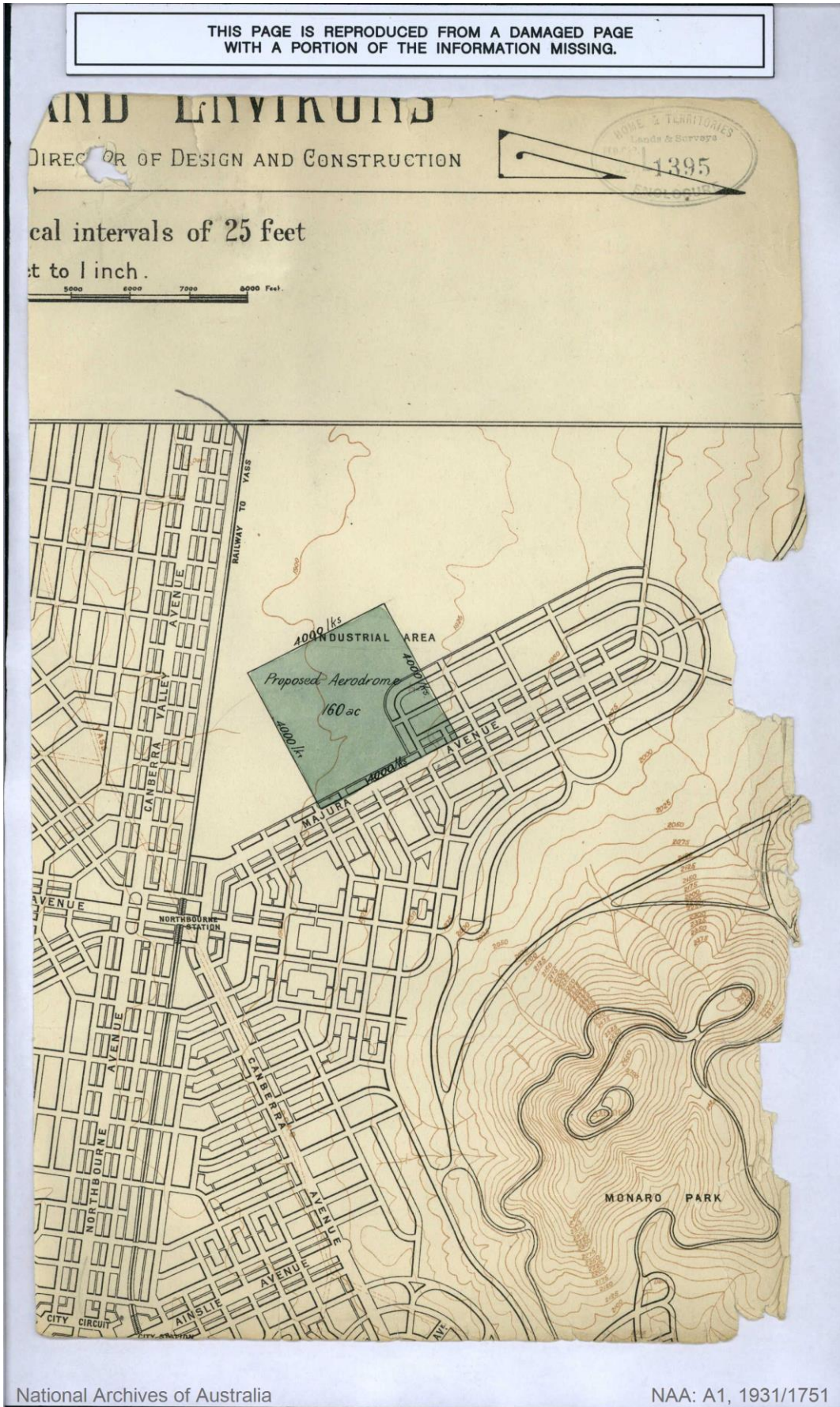


Image 3: Area proposed for aerodrome by Defence Department in October 1921 (NAA: A1, 1931/1751).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME



Image 4: Plan No. A. C. 446 sent from the Secretary of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee to the Minister of Works and Railways on 10 May 1923 (NAA: A199, FC1924/447).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME



Image 5: Aircraft crash - DH9 aircraft, serial A6-28, which crashed at the original Canberra Aerodrome on 11 February 1926 (NAA: A3560, 438).



Image 6: Aircraft crash - DH9 aircraft, serial A6-28, which crashed at the original Canberra Aerodrome on 11 February 1926 (NAA: A3560, 439).



Image 7: Aircraft crash - DH9 aircraft, serial A6-28, which crashed at the original Canberra Aerodrome on 11 February 1926 (NAA: A3560, 440)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

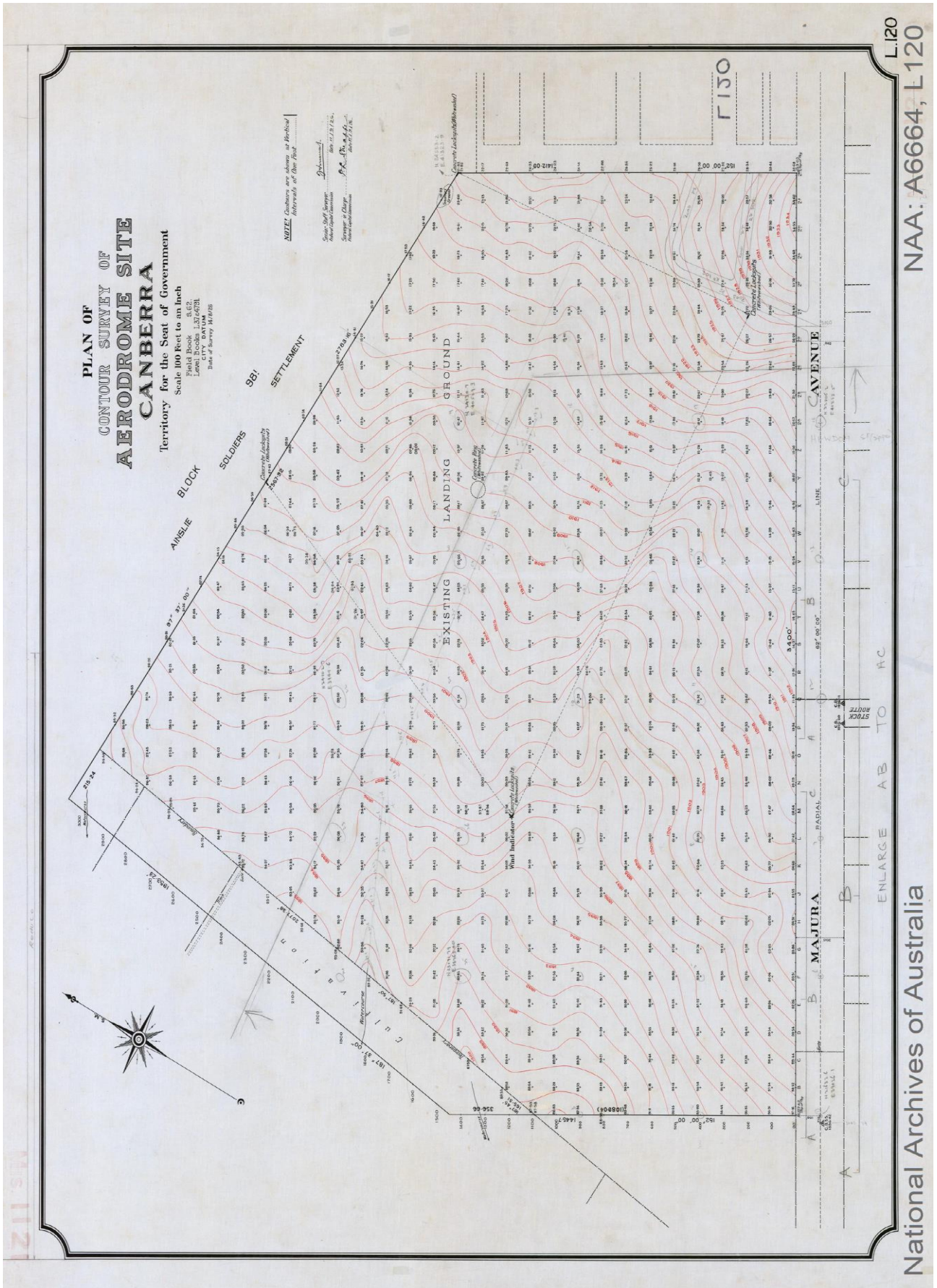


Image 8: Plan of Contour Survey of Aerodrome Site – Canberra (NAA: A6664, L120)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME



Image 9: Possible remnant of Lockspit A (provided as an attachment to the nomination)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

APPENDIX 1: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF NEWSPAPER PRESS ARTICLES RELATING TO THE ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ORIGINAL CANBERRA AERODROME

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