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Chapter 10

Aerodrome: A step into the future.

Whereas Governments at the State, and later Federal level were reluctant to invest money in the roads and wharf facilities of a declining Cooktown, the plan to provide the town with landing facilities for aircraft received enthusiastic support. In contrast to the experience with roads and the railway, the provision of Cooktown's first aircraft landing ground was delayed not by the higher tiers of Government, but by obstruction and disagreement at the local authority level. Delays were also caused by the time consuming practicalities of securing legal tenure to land critical to the project. However, once Cooktown managed to "get airborne", progress was swift. In the ten years from when the first aerodrome was built in May 1935 to the end of the Second World War, three separate aerodromes were constructed at Cooktown. The result was a facility that, as much as any other, helped to reverse Cooktown's decline.

The arrival of air transport in rural Australia transformed the life of its people. It offered fast transport for passengers and mail to an area often without even a rudimentary road system. For instance, before the first aeroplane landed on a hastily cleared area at Cooktown in the early 1930s, the only means of transport to and from the town was by boat. Hospital patients, who would previously have been forced to wait until a boat was available and then endure an eight-hour trip, frequently in rough seas, were now able to be admitted to the Cairns Base Hospital within hours of a phone call for help. Air transport also played an important part in defence. When North Queensland was threatened by Japanese attack in World War Two, the Cooktown aerodrome

provided a defence mantle for the people of the area, and played an important part in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Aerodrome No. 1: the racecourse site, round one.

The formal application for the first aerodrome at Cooktown was lodged by the Cooktown Town Council on 25 September 1930. When it reviewed the application the Department of Defence said that it was gratified that Cooktown would join other municipalities along the coast in providing a chain of landing grounds. The Department's enthusiasm was not a sham. Within a few months of the application, V.H. Augenson, Inspector of Aerodromes, was sent to report on the suitability of the Cooktown Racecourse Reserve as a landing ground.⁸³⁷ He also inspected an alternative site on a tidal saltpan to the north-west of the racecourse, but rejected it because of drainage problems. This site had previously been used as a rifle range, and was mostly free from vegetation. However, it flooded at high tides, causing the surface to become boggy for lengthy periods. In view of the subsequent history of the aerodrome at Cooktown, it is interesting to note Inspector Augensen's low opinion of the saltpan site.⁸³⁸

Augensen was unable to find a suitable alternative site within reasonable distance of the town, and agreed that the Racecourse

⁸³⁷ H.C. Brinsmead, Controller of Civil Aviation, Melbourne, to Town Clerk, Cooktown Town Council, 10 November 1930. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸³⁸ H.C. Brinsmead, Controller of Civil Aviation, Department of Defence, Melbourne to The Town Clerk, Cooktown Town Council, Cooktown, 31 December 1930. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Reserve would have to do. He prepared plans for the improvements which, depending on the level of construction undertaken, would accommodate either light or heavy aircraft. The first stage of improvements would allow light aircraft up to, but not including, Avro X type aeroplanes to operate. However, he said that with additional earthworks, and clearing and fencing of the perimeter, the facility could be licensed to handle all types of aircraft.⁸³⁹

The first problem was funding. As the Town Council did not have the money to construct a landing ground, it applied to the Queensland Department of Labour and Industry for funding under the Unemployment Relief scheme. However, the Council failed to provide the information necessary to process the application, and the Department said it would proceed only when this was rectified.⁸⁴⁰ This apparent reluctance of the Council staff to follow the bureaucratic process is reflected in many instances over a long period of time.

The next hurdle was tenure over the land. Although the Council had been granted permission to build an aerodrome, it had not secured control of the proposed site, which was leased to the Cooktown Amateur Hack Race Club. The local State Member was recruited to have an Order in Council issued vesting control of Racecourse Reserve R109 in the Town Council.⁸⁴¹ The matter was complicated,

⁸³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴⁰ Department of Labour and Industry, Brisbane, to J.C. Kenny, Parliament House, Brisbane, 26 November 1930. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁴¹ W.A. Deacon, Minister for Lands, Brisbane, to J.A.C. Kenny, M.L.A., Brisbane, 17 December, 1930. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

however, when Mr Marrinan, the President of the Race Club, raised objections to the transfer. This move caught everyone off guard, as Marrinan was one of the original instigators of the scheme to use the racecourse site as an aerodrome. The Town Council, which was in favour of the racecourse site, accused Marrinan and a small section of the Race Club membership of being obstructive, and said they did not reflect the view of the majority. It said they had changed their mind and wanted the aerodrome built on the saltpan site rejected by Inspector Augenson.⁸⁴² This was ignored at the time.

Just when it seemed possible that a start might finally be made on the aerodrome, the plan was put in jeopardy by division between the Cooktown Town Council and the Cook Shire Council. The Town Council was completely committed to the project, but the Shire Council advised the Government that it would not proceed with the building of the aerodrome.⁸⁴³ This decision reveals the complicated relationship between the two Councils. Although the Town Council was willing to proceed with the aerodrome, the racecourse site was situated on the boundary between the two local authorities. The aerodrome itself would be in territory controlled by the Town Council, but the area required for flight approaches came under the control of the Shire Council. The argument had other repercussions. Neither Council was financially viable, and the aerodrome could be constructed only if they cooperated. Unfortunately, they failed to reach a compromise, and the

⁸⁴² Town Clerk, Cooktown Town Council, Cooktown, to H.C. Brinsmead, Controller of Aviation, Melbourne, 17 March 1931. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁴³ E.C. Johnston, A/Controller of Aviation, Melbourne to Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 23 December 1932. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

matter was dropped. The Controller of Civil Aviation told the Town Council he appreciated its efforts to secure the cooperation of the Shire Council, and urged members to keep trying.⁸⁴⁴ By this time, however, the obstacle of inter-council rivalry was resolved by a Government decision to abolish the Cooktown Town Council and absorb it into the Cook Shire Council.⁸⁴⁵ However, the amalgamated Council still did not have the money to build the strip, and Cooktown had to make do with makeshift arrangements on the Racecourse for some time.

The first air services.

Despite the temporary nature of the strip, it was well used for passengers and rescue flights. Ask any older Cooktown resident who brought air services to the area and they will tell you it was Tom McDonald. McDonald was a "Manufacturing Jeweller, Diamond Setter and Engraver" from Cairns, who was one of the first commercial aviators in North Queensland. A cairn and commemorative plaque at the Cooktown racecourse attest to McDonald's place in Cooktown's aviation history. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when McDonald made his first mercy flight to Cooktown he did not land the plane, but dropped the urgently needed medicine close to the hospital. No landing ground was available, so the parcel of drugs had been carefully packed to withstand the fall. Despite the considerable expense of operating his

⁸⁴⁴ E.C. Johnston, A/Controller of Aviation, Melbourne, to Town Clerk, Cooktown Town Council, Cooktown, 23 December 1932. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

aircraft, McDonald refused to take payment for the service.⁸⁴⁶ The first patient taken by McDonald from Cooktown to Cairns was Miles Donald, who was brought from Laura to Cooktown hospital by railway pump car. The Cooktown doctor suspected kidney failure and requested help from the Cairns Base Hospital. The story is told that McDonald was located at a Cairns picture theatre and asked to fly to Cooktown at 10 p.m. with the doctor as a passenger. McDonald agreed, and after flying to Cooktown, delivered both doctor and patient back to Cairns after midnight, despite the absence of navigation aids or proper landing lights at either end of the trip.⁸⁴⁷ McDonald was always ready to help, but realised that an aerial ambulance system would be successful only if it was formally constituted and had official recognition. This was achieved in 1937 with the formation of the Cairns Aerial Ambulance Service under the auspices of the Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade (Q.A.T.B.).

Despite the absence of a registered aerodrome, by late 1934 Cooktown was well serviced by air transport. Tom McDonald operated three regular flights to Cooktown each week. He landed his aircraft on the racecourse ground at Cooktown, the surface of which had received rudimentary preparation.⁸⁴⁸ McDonald's service provided many benefits to the people of Cooktown. For the first time Cairns was immediately

⁸⁴⁵ Telegram from Assistant Under Home Secretary, Brisbane, to Town Clerk, Cooktown Town Council, Cooktown, 28 July 1932. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁴⁶ Doreen McFarlane, interviewed by Peter Ryle at Cairns, 19 November 1998.

⁸⁴⁷ Jim MacDowall, interview.

⁸⁴⁸ T. McDonald, Cairns, to The Cooktown Council, Cooktown, 30 November 1934. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

accessible, both for personal and medical reasons. Cooktown also benefited commercially, as tourists with limited time available could visit the town.

However one of the most important benefits was that McDonald gave the Department of Posts And Telegraphs extra leverage to achieve a more competitive mail contract between Cairns and Cooktown. Following the cyclone of 1933, only one boat serviced Cooktown, and the operator demanded £2,200 per annum to carry mail. The Department thought this was excessive, and reduced the contract price to £1,200 in later tenders by actively courting alternative carriers. Even this was too high, and the postal authorities were determined to reduce it further. New contracts were to commence in 1935, and tenders were called early to allow southern interests to participate. Alternative carriers were also approached personally and encouraged to submit tenders.⁸⁴⁹

McDonald saw the new mail contract as an opportunity to consolidate his air venture. In November 1934 he asked the Cook Shire Council to support his bid for a contract to carry first class mail on a weight basis. McDonald thought that the postal authorities would jump at the proposal, as he could guarantee a faster and more frequent service.⁸⁵⁰ The Council dutifully approached the District Postal Inspector at Cairns

⁸⁴⁹ Memo from F.F. Hunter, District Postal Inspector, Cairns, to Deputy Director of Posts And Telegraphs, 28 March 1935, BP8 F1950/394, Australian Archives.

⁸⁵⁰ T. McDonald, Cairns, to The Cooktown Council, Cooktown, 30 November, 1934. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

supporting McDonald's offer.⁸⁵¹ The bid was unsuccessful, but after tenders were called for the mail run in 1935, McDonald went public. Through an article in the Cairns Post, he offered to carry the mail for a competitive price. He said the present contract for mail delivery to Cooktown by sea cost the public £1,200 in subsidy. In contrast, he offered to carry first-class mail, including registered articles, for only £300 annually. The inclusion of second-class mail would add only £200 to the subsidy, a considerable saving on the present contract. McDonald also intended to extend his service to Townsville, connecting with flights from Brisbane. This would enable passengers and freight to travel between Cooktown and Brisbane three times weekly.⁸⁵² The postal authorities regarded the article as part of a propaganda war between McDonald and Hayles Magnetic Island Ltd, and doubted McDonald's stated intention to carry the mail for £500 per annum. However, they felt that the mutual antagonism could be used to gain a lower contract price.⁸⁵³

Tenders were advertised in the leading metropolitan daily newspapers as well as in the local press. Two alternative services were offered; 273(a) from Port Douglas to Cooktown via Cape Tribulation, and 273(b) from Cairns to Cooktown via Cape Tribulation.⁸⁵⁴ The former, an alternative to the existing Cairns route, brought a strong response from the Cairns Chamber of Commerce. It claimed that Cooktown

⁸⁵¹ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, to F.H. Hunter, District Postal Inspector, Cairns, 11 December 1934. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁵² Cairns Post, 27 May 1935.

⁸⁵³ Memo from F.F.Hunter, District Postal Inspector, Cairns, to District Director of Posts And Telegraphs, 27 May 1935, BP8 F1950/394, Australian Archives.

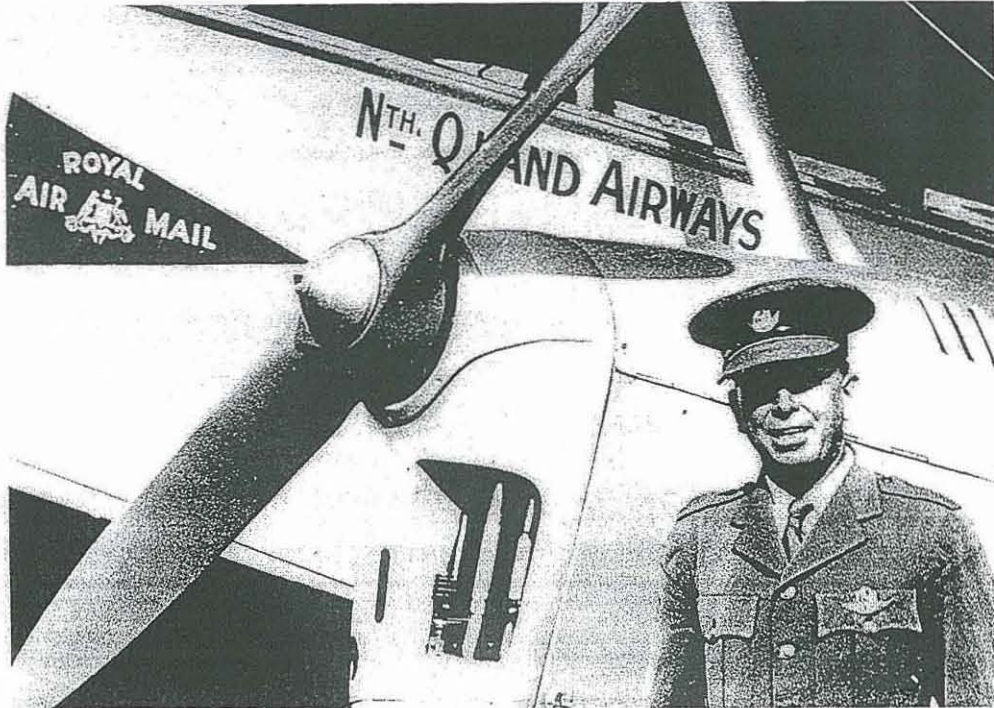
merchants obtained their goods from Cairns, and would face extra charges from double handling if the boat service started at Port Douglas. The extra handling would also be detrimental to perishable products.⁸⁵⁵ This is a clear indication that Cooktown's role as a port had been completely usurped by Cairns. Goods were no longer shipped direct to Cooktown. Although the postal authorities called specifically for the carriage of mails to Cooktown by sea, McDonald offered an alternative air mail service. Ultimately only two tenders were received. Hayles Magnetic Island Ltd of Townsville, the established carrier, tendered £975 per annum to deliver mail by motor launch once weekly. In contrast, McDonald offered to carry mail to Cooktown by air three times weekly. His quote for a five-year contract was £300 per year, with an increase to £400 for the second half of the contract period. He had even arranged to lease the Cairns Aquatic Club's motor launch for a weekly delivery by sea if the weather prevented his aircraft from flying.⁸⁵⁶

It could be expected that any attempt to provide an improved mail service to the residents of remote areas of the State would be supported by the majority of North Queenslanders, and especially the business community. However, McDonald's offer met resistance from the Cairns Chamber of Commerce, which expressed reservations about the proposed air-mail service to Cooktown. It claimed that if

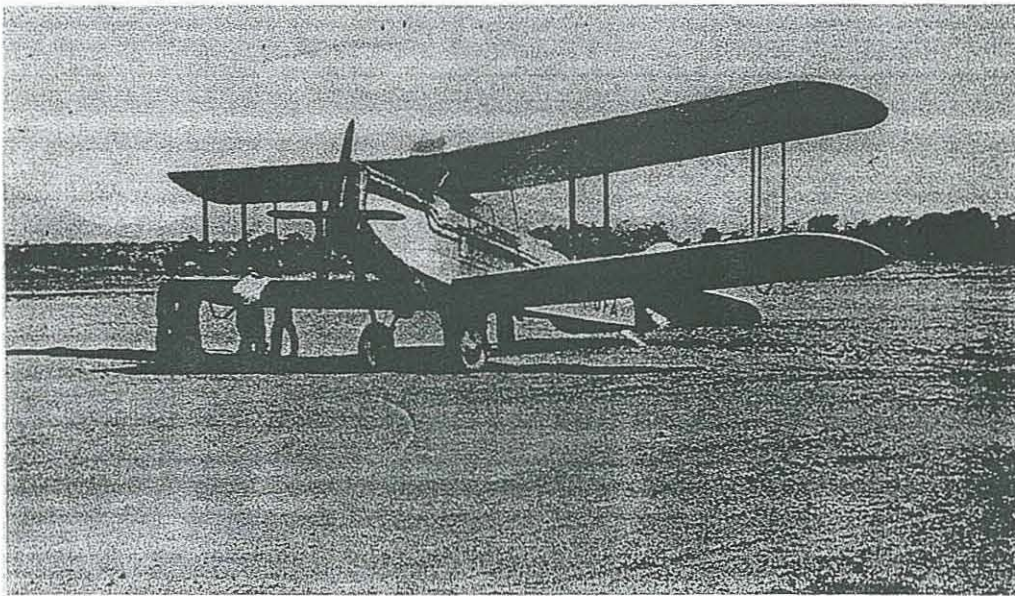
⁸⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁵ J.N. Tennant, Secretary, Cairns Chamber of Commerce, to District Inspector of Posts And Telegraphs, 28 May 1935, BP8 F1950/394, Australian Archives.

⁸⁵⁶ Memo from Fred V. Becke, Senior Inspector for Posts and Telegraphs, to Deputy Director of Posts and Telegraphs, 2 July 1935, BP8 F1950/394, Australian Archives.



Tom McDonald, c. 1930s. (Cairns Historical Society).



One of Tom McDonald's first aeroplanes, c. 1930s. (Cairns Historical Society).

Hayles lost any portion of the mail contract, the sea service to Cooktown would be in jeopardy. A number of private citizens and service organisations, as well as local members of Parliament were also in favour of Hayles retaining the contract.⁸⁵⁷

The Postal Department did well out of the situation. While it was unsuccessful in attracting tenders from other shipping companies, the intervention of McDonald helped it secure a lower price from Hayles. The Deputy Director thought the money saved should go towards paying McDonald to carry first-class mail to Cooktown.⁸⁵⁸ In contrast to the usually slow process of bureaucratic decision making, the Department lost no time in initiating the air mail service. Cooktown people learned that a service would commence on Sunday 27 October 1935, carrying mail between Townsville, Cairns and Cooktown.⁸⁵⁹ In commemoration of the occasion, the Shire Council arranged for the issue of special envelopes, in which greetings were sent to various dignitaries, including the Prime Minister. The Council was pleased to be told that the envelope would make an interesting addition to the Prime Minister's collection.⁸⁶⁰

McDonald had his fuel supplies drastically reduced when petrol was rationed during the war, and was unable to provide the same level of

⁸⁵⁷ List of representations in favour of existing service. F.F. Hunter, District Inspector, Cairns, to Deputy Director of Posts and Telegraphs, 22 July 1935, BP8 F1950/394, Australian Archives.

⁸⁵⁸ Minute Paper from Deputy Director, Posts and Telegraphs, to Senior Inspector, Posts and Telegraphs, 15 August 1935, BP8 F1950/394, Australian Archives.

⁸⁵⁹ Cooktown Independent & Northern Sun, 28 October 1935.

service. The Shire Council did not hesitate to protect what it saw as the district's interests, and asked the Liquid Fuel Control Board to exempt McDonald from the rationing scheme. The Board was reminded of the important part McDonald played in pioneering air services in North Queensland, and told that he required access to fuel to allow him to continue to provide the aerial ambulance service he had supplied in the past.⁸⁶¹

Unfortunately, the ploy did not work. The Department of Civil Aviation refused any further fuel allocation to McDonald. Although it appreciated McDonald's pioneering work in northern aviation, he was operating his air service without a license from the Department, and in breach of the Air Navigation Regulations. McDonald's bona fide charter flights could continue, as his fuel ration would remain at its present level, allowing him to fly for eight hours per month. Mercy flights were not under threat, as the Department's Cairns representative was authorised to allocate extra fuel for medical or ambulance flights.⁸⁶² The Council then asked the Liquid Fuel Control Board and the Government to completely remove fuel rationing for the area.⁸⁶³ Harry Bruce, the Minister for

⁸⁶⁰ J.A. Lyons, Prime Minister, Canberra, to Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 1 November 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.* It was claimed that the first aerial ambulance trip from Cooktown was provided when McDonald flew a seriously ill child to Cairns in 1937. North Australian Monthly, Vol. 3, No. 2, September 1956, p. 39.

⁸⁶² A.B. Corbett, for Director-General of Civil Aviation, Melbourne, to Mr. J. Gaiter, Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, (ND). Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

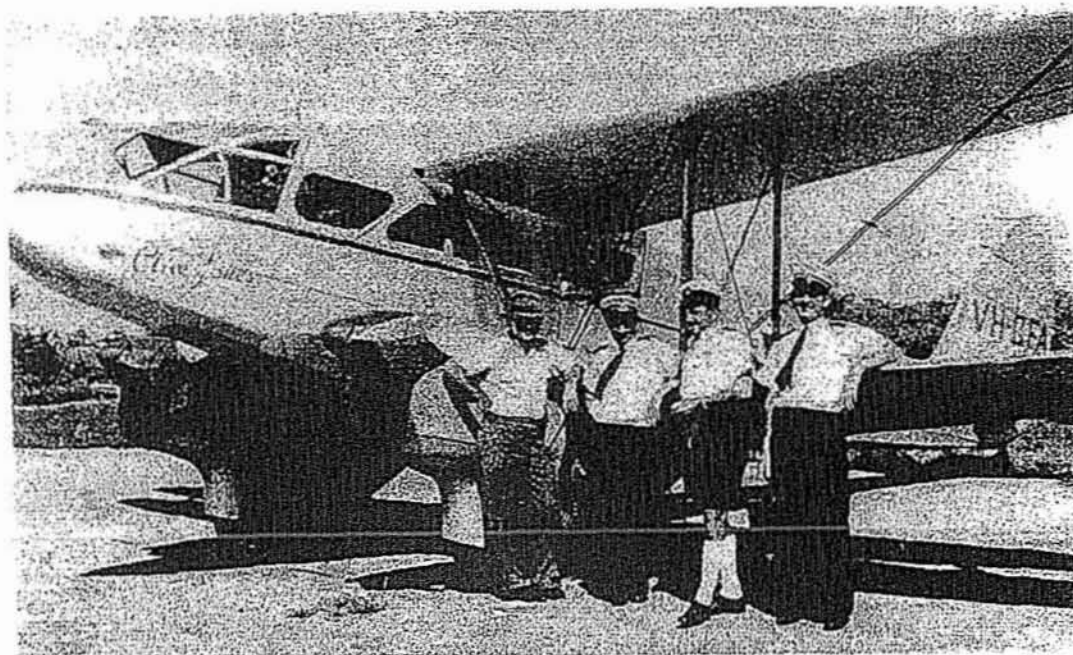
⁸⁶³ Secretary, Liquid Fuel Control Board, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 17 October 1940. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Public Works, made an official application for the exemption of the whole of the area of Queensland above the 19th parallel from the provisions of the Act.⁸⁶⁴ Obviously the request failed, as fuel rationing was in force until after the end of hostilities.

The Council acted again in defence of Tom McDonald when he claimed that the Government had changed Regulation 79 of the Act, preventing him from offering an air service to Cooktown and the surrounding area. McDonald operated charter flights in the area on an irregular basis, but the amendment, which deemed that a service would be regarded as regular if it was operated for two or more times within a four week period, made such services illegal. McDonald claimed that the amendment resulted from a meeting between the subsidised airline Companies and the Controller of Civil Aviation, and were framed to exclude small operators from offering competition.⁸⁶⁵ The Council asked Senator J.S. Collings, the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, to support McDonald. However, the Department refuted McDonald's claims of bias, telling Collings that in 1938 McDonald had sold his airline business, with the routes, to Airlines of Australia. This company was then issued with licenses to operate on the Cairns to Thursday Island and Cairns to Normanton routes. However, McDonald subsequently resumed operating in the same areas and now wanted the Thursday Island license awarded to him. This was refused, but the

⁸⁶⁴ Harry Bruce, Minister for Public Works, Brisbane, to The Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 9 October 1940. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁶⁵ T. McDonald, Cairns, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown Shire Council, Cooktown, 28 November 1940. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.



Cairns Aerial Ambulance aeroplane at Horn Island, 1952. (Cairns Historical Society).

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Aerial Ambulance over Cairns. (Cairns Historical Society).

Department had offered him the Cairns-Normanton route, which he rejected.⁸⁶⁶

Mantle of Safety: The Aerial Ambulance.

After the aerial ambulance service started in 1937, it relied on hired aeroplanes flown by commercial pilots on loan from airline companies. The service was hindered by wartime restrictions on fuel and aircraft, but after the war it was able to purchase its own aircraft. In 1946 a number of Cooktown residents asked the Cairns branch of the Q.A.T.B. to send some officers to Cooktown to explain how the service worked, and to enlist members.⁸⁶⁷ The scheme was well received at a public meeting, and a committee of seven members was elected to accept membership applications.⁸⁶⁸ The Aerial Ambulance service offered "one trip only in any one year for individual subscribers or in a case of a married man, his wife or any member of his family up to sixteen years of age". The subscription was £5 per year. Alternatively, a fee of £7 per year would cover an entire family with children over sixteen years of age. Non-subscribers would be charged at the rate of one shilling and six pence (1/6) per flying mile.⁸⁶⁹ Eventually Provisional Committees were established at Cooktown and other country centres to raise funds for the Aerial Ambulance. The financial statements of the Q.A.T.B.

⁸⁶⁶ J. McEwen, Minister for Civil Aviation, Melbourne, to Senator J.S. Collings, Leader of the Opposition, Canberra, 13 June 1941. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁶⁷ Meeting, Q.A.T.B. (Cairns Centre), 17 July 1946. The Cairns Historical Society.

⁸⁶⁸ Minutes of Public Meeting convened by W.C.H. Hodges, and held at the Council Chambers, Cooktown, on Thursday the 23rd January, 1947, at 8 p.m. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁶⁹ Advertising brochure for the Cairns Aerial Ambulance Service. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Cairns Branch indicate that the people of Cooktown contributed generously to the scheme.⁸⁷⁰ The majority of employees and many commercial establishments in the district also contributed to the scheme each week as donors and subscribers.⁸⁷¹

Eventually the role of the Aerial Ambulance was taken over by the Flying Doctor Service, which, like its predecessor, provided the population of remote areas of the Peninsula with efficient speedy transportation to Cairns for urgent medical treatment. The Aerial Ambulance offered much needed help for the people of remote areas like Cooktown for many years, but the larger and better equipped aircraft available to the Flying Doctor Service, and the presence of qualified medical practitioners on board, undoubtedly provides a superior service.

Racecourse site, round two.

Although some improvements to the surface of the racecourse had allowed McDonald and the Aerial Ambulance to service Cooktown, it was still a makeshift arrangement. By late 1934 the Shire Council again urged the Controller of Civil Aviation to upgrade the landing ground to take larger aircraft. However, no officer was available to survey the site,

⁸⁷⁰ For instance the statements show that in February 1959 the Cooktown Provisional Committee donated £266, followed by another £50 in March. Similar sums were donated regularly. Q.A.T.B. (Cairns Branch) Cash Book. The Cairns Historical Society.

⁸⁷¹ The members of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union who worked at Queerah meatworks contributed to both the Q.A.T.B. and the Aerial Ambulance. They

and the Council was told that the proposals suggested by Inspector Augenson in 1930 were still applicable. By using these specifications, the Council could submit a plan and details that would receive the consideration of the Department.⁸⁷²

Once again, tenure and funding had to be obtained. While the Council was confident of the cooperation of the Race Club in obtaining the race course reserve, further land was required for flight paths. This meant the Council would have to purchase or resume the land if it was privately owned, or obtain a lease if the Crown owned it. Resumption would be the most cost effective method of acquiring private land, as property values in the area were particularly low. Council thought the land for the project could be had for £100. The State and Commonwealth Governments would also have to come to an agreement on the tenure of the racecourse, which was leased by the Trustees of the Race Club from the Crown.⁸⁷³

Acting on press reports that £30,000 was to be allocated for the construction of six aerodromes throughout Australia, the Council asked for £3,500 for the Cooktown landing ground. The money would employ twenty men for five months at award rates, relieving the unemployment problem in the town. The Shire Clerk said that once Cooktown had a

supported the Aerial Ambulance as it provided a service to the cattle producers who supplied the meat works.

⁸⁷² E.C. Johnston, Controller of Civil Aviation, Melbourne, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 4 January 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁷³ The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Mr E.C. Johnston, Controller of Civil Aviation, Canberra, 6 February 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

good aerodrome it would become a stopping point on a proposed New Guinea air service. Cooktown would again become an important part of the New Guinea trade, just as it was when trading ships stopped there in the past. The Council asked the Commonwealth to take charge of the project because it used the State Main Roads Commission to perform its construction work, which would save on “overheads” such as plans and specifications.⁸⁷⁴

While the Government refused the request for £3,500, it did offer £500 from the Unemployment Relief Fund to assist in the construction of a “municipal aerodrome” at Cooktown.⁸⁷⁵ Inspector Augenson examined the site in 1935, and identified the land that had to be resumed or purchased to provide sufficient area for the drome. This included twenty-nine allotments of land, and the lease of Reserve No 109, the racecourse reserve. The Council was wary of legal repercussions, and asked the Government to provide a surveyor to identify the land and expedite the transfers.⁸⁷⁶ No surveyor was available, but as the owners of most of the private land were in arrears with rates, the Home Secretary's office decided there was little risk in resuming it, and told the Council to “proceed forthwith”.⁸⁷⁷ Despite this advice, there were problems. Some allotments were owned by the Crown, and could

⁸⁷⁴ The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Mr D. Riordan, M.H.R., Canberra, 6 February 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁷⁵ James Orwin, Works Director For Queensland, Works And Services Branch, Department Of The Interior, Brisbane, to Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 4 March 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁷⁶ Cook Shire Council Minutes, 3 May 1935.

⁸⁷⁷ Telegram from Acting Under Home Secretary, to Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 13 April 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

easily be transferred. The registered owners of some of the remaining properties were either deceased, or had left the district and could not be contacted. These blocks were in arrears for Council rates, some being in debt in excess of the value of the land, and could easily be resumed. However, two of the properties were owned by locals, and they opposed the resumption.

Mrs G.B. Muller, who owned approximately thirty-six acres near the racecourse, was the only private landowner not in arrears for rates. Her land was in the path of rising planes, and was needed as an emergency landing field in the event of an aborted take-off.⁸⁷⁸ The Council hoped to avoid litigation to secure the property, and asked how much she would sell it for.⁸⁷⁹ Initially Mrs Muller asked for £300, which she stated would barely cover the original purchase price.⁸⁸⁰ However, after some delicate bargaining she eventually agreed to accept £200.⁸⁸¹

Council expected the only other land owner who could be contacted, J.R. Thompson, to make what they regarded as a "similarly exorbitant claim".⁸⁸² Thompson assessed the value of his property at £290.⁸⁸³

⁸⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷⁹ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Mrs G.B. Muller, Cooktown, 13 April 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸⁰ Blanche Muller, Cooktown, to Mr E. Ellis, Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 16 April 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸¹ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Secretary, Land Administration Board, Department of Public Lands, Brisbane, 17 July 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸² Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to The Under Secretary, Lands Department, Brisbane, 7 May 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸³ J.R. Thompson, Cooktown, to The Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 21 October 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

This confirmed the view that he would be unreasonable, and the Council countered with an offer of £105 for the "lands, and all improvements thereon, which have been resumed for aviation purposes".⁸⁸⁴ Eventually both sides agreed to a sum of £159/4/6, to be paid towards rates owing on the land.⁸⁸⁵ The Council also approached the Race Club, asking them to transfer the Race Course lease, with a guarantee that the site would be available for racing as needed. The Shire Clerk pointed out that Council could acquire the land under the provisions of the Public Works Land Resumptions Acts, Section 4, but stressed it would prefer an amicable agreement.⁸⁸⁶ The terms were accepted, and Cooktown finally had the land for an official aerodrome

Despite the delays, the Council continued to make progress. On 16 May 1935 Government funds were allocated for the construction of the landing ground, with labour to be drawn from the local Labour Bureau. Married men were eligible for six weeks work, and single men for two weeks. Rates of pay would be in accordance with the Local Authorities Award, and quotes for the hire of machinery would be submitted to the Works Department. The grant was limited to £500, and the Council was warned that it would not be reimbursed for any expenditure over this

⁸⁸⁴ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to J.R. Thompson, Cooktown, 4 December 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸⁵ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to J.R. Thompson, Cooktown, 21 December 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸⁶ E. Ellis, Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to The Chairman, The Trustees, Race Course Reserve, Cooktown, 12 April 1935. E. Ellis, Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Mr C. Marrinan, Secretary, Cooktown Hack Club, Cooktown, 12 April 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

amount.⁸⁸⁷ As if to illustrate the need for an air service for speedier mail delivery, this information had still not been delivered to the Council when construction work began on 22 May.⁸⁸⁸

The job went well. By 5 August, the strip was completed five chains wide, or half its finished width, for the entire length of 600 yards, and the Council expected that within another ten days the strip would be completely finished. The final accounting revealed that approximately 700 cubic yards of gravel, and 200 cubic yards of rock had been used in filling, levelling and draining the area.⁸⁸⁹ However, some tasks had been more costly than estimated, and the Council intended to ask the Civil Aviation Department for further funding.⁸⁹⁰ The £500 grant had covered all the planned construction, except for two embankments. The strip had been tested by Air Force Survey planes, and the pilots expressed surprise at the high quality of the landing ground, which could be used from either end with safety. The Council now wanted another £1,000 to construct a cross strip, and to provide further draining and gravelling. Grass covering to the area surrounding the landing strip was also needed to prevent erosion. The construction had provided work for three staff men and twenty five casuals, with many local unemployed men getting a minimum of £4/11/0 each from the job.

⁸⁸⁷ James Orwin, Works Director for Queensland, Works And Services Branch, Department Of The Interior, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown Shire Council, Cooktown, 16 May 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸⁸ Telegram from Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Orwin, Commonwealth Public Works, Brisbane, 22 May 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁸⁹ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Mr Orwin, Dept., Interior, Works & Services Branch, Brisbane, 2 September 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁹⁰ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Mr Orwin, Dept., Interior, Works & Services Branch, Brisbane, 5 August 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

This money was all spent locally, providing a boost to the town's economy.⁸⁹¹

The request was unsuccessful, but Senator Gordon Brown agreed with the Shire Council that the construction of an aerodrome at Cooktown should be considered a defence priority. While many politicians ignored the worsening world political situation, some, like Brown, were aware of the threat. In agreeing to support the claim for more funds for the aerodrome he stated: "Especially now there is talk of war, surely our Defence Lords will consider Cooktown more than they have done in the past".⁸⁹² The Council also asked D.H. Riordan, M.H.R., to support its cause. He was reminded that the winner of a recent air race, Captain Scott, said that Cooktown was the natural defence centre for the north. In the circumstances, the expenditure of a further £1,000 on the Cooktown aerodrome would be good economy from both a defence and a commercial point of view.⁸⁹³ The Council claimed that landing grounds in New Guinea, linked with those in North Queensland, would guarantee the supply of basic metals to Australia in the case of war.⁸⁹⁴

⁸⁹¹ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Senator Gordon Brown, Brisbane, 27 August 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. (The date on this letter appears to be in error as it was filed on 9 August. It also appears that Senator Brown replied on 28 August.)

⁸⁹² Gordon Brown, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 28 August 1935. Transcript on Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁹³ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Mr D.H. Riordan, M.H.R., Canberra, 2 September 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁹⁴ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to Mr D.H. Riordan, M.H.R., Parliament House, Brisbane, 10 September 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. It is ironic that the Cooktown Council predicted the need for a series of aerodromes to feed defence personnel and equipment to New Guinea. During the Second World War such a series of aerodromes was constructed for the defence of Australia.

Obviously the defence chiefs did not share Brown and Riordan's views on northern defence. The appeals fell on deaf ears, and Riordan was told that the Department had no funds available for further work on the Cooktown aerodrome.⁸⁹⁵

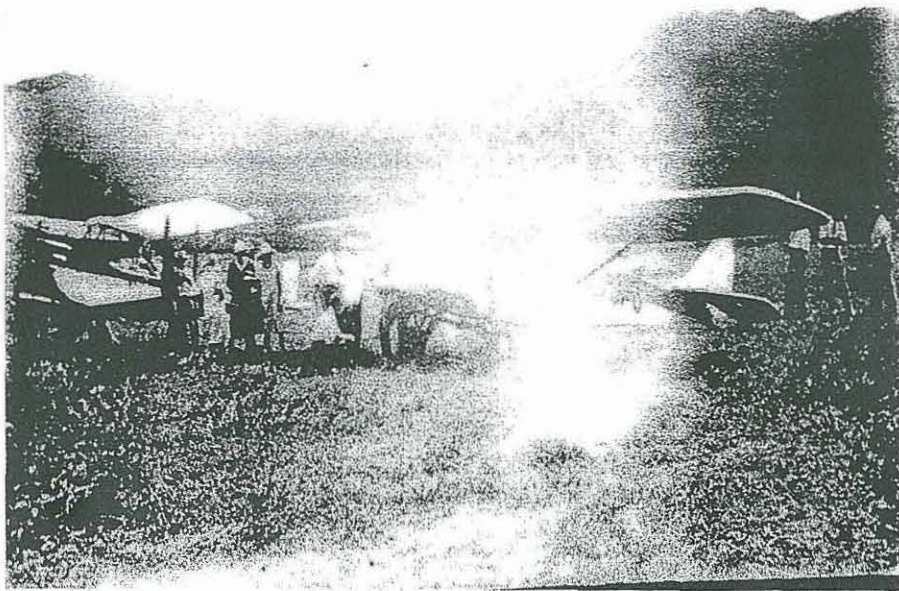
Despite the rebuffs, Cooktown had achieved its original goal to get an aerodrome. After the Council erected a wind indicator and constructed a ground mark to comply with regulations, the Controller of Civil Aviation issued License No. 201 for the Cooktown Aerodrome, valid for twelve months from 17 September 1935.⁸⁹⁶ However, the Council was not content to accept what it regarded as an incomplete aerodrome, and asked the Minister for Defence for £500 to construct embankments and drains, or £1,500 to upgrade to a first class drome.⁸⁹⁷ Once again they were refused.⁸⁹⁸ Cooktown had long known that "the squeaky wheel gets the oil", and ignored the rebuffs, making another request to upgrade the aerodrome. This time it claimed that North Queensland Airways and R.W. Carpenter & Company proposed a regular air service between Sydney and New Guinea, and had rejected Cooktown as the main northern landing ground because the present strip was

⁸⁹⁵ M.L. Shepherd, Secretary, Department Of Defence, Melbourne, to D. Riordan, M.H.R., Federal Members' Rooms, Brisbane, 20 September 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

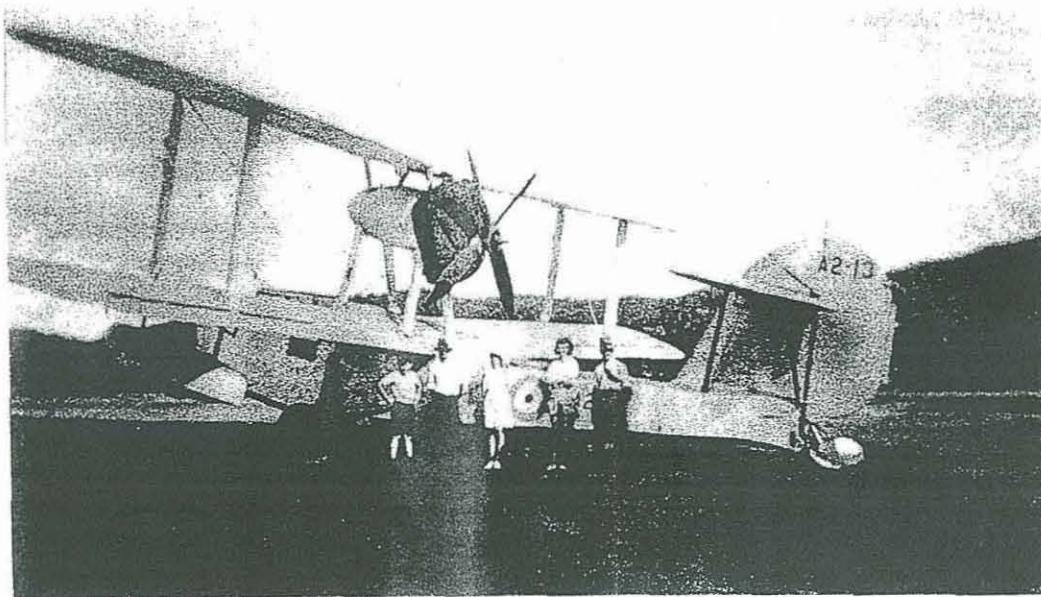
⁸⁹⁶ A.R. McComb, A/Controller of Civil Aviation, Melbourne, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 18 September 1935. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁹⁷ Shire Clerk, Cooktown to The Hon. The Minister for Defence, Canberra, 14 February 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁸⁹⁸ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Hon. The Minister for Defence, Canberra, 10 July 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. Archdale Parkhill, Minister for Defence, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 11 March 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.



Aeroplanes on Racecourse Aerodrome, Cooktown , c. 1936. (Cairns Historical Society).



Plane and passengers on Racecourse Aerodrome, c. 1936. (Cairns Historical Society).

inadequate.⁸⁹⁹ The Department confirmed that an air route to New Guinea was under consideration, and that improvements to the aerodrome at Cooktown were contemplated.⁹⁰⁰ The proposed service, which would start at Sydney, would include stops at Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville, Cairns, Cooktown and Horn Island, before proceeding to New Guinea. Horn Island would be the first point of entry to Australian territory, but Cairns or Cooktown could also be official places of entry.⁹⁰¹ The Council was told that if Cooktown was chosen as a landing ground the Commonwealth would control the drome through the Department of Civil Aviation.

Inspector Augenson was sent back to Cooktown in September 1936 to report on its suitability for larger aircraft. He found that the existing runway was sufficient for light aircraft, but a number of improvements were necessary to allow larger multi-engine planes to operate. He agreed that a cross runway and bund walls and drainage to prevent inundation at "king" tides were necessary, and also wanted to relocate the horse enclosure and grandstand at the racecourse.⁹⁰² It was estimated that the extra clearing and drainage works would cost

⁸⁹⁹ Archdale Parkhill, Minister for Defence, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 11 March 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁰⁰ M.L. Shepherd, Secretary, Department of Defence, Melbourne, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 6 August 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁰¹ Memorandum from M.L. Shepherd, Secretary, Department of Trade and Customs, to The Comptroller-General, Department of Trade and Customs, Canberra, F.C.T., 17 February 1937, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁰² V. Augenson, Inspector of Aerodromes, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 14 September 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

£3,100.⁹⁰³ He also looked for alternative sites for a larger aerodrome, and inspected the only two sites identified as being sufficiently flat, and within a reasonable distance of the town. One, an area to the south of the Annan River, was rejected because extensive and expensive road works would be needed for all-weather access. Augenson again inspected the rifle range area on the tidal saltpan north-west of the racecourse, and repeated his view that the site would be excessively costly to reclaim and resurface.⁹⁰⁴

The Federal Government could control the aerodrome only if it held title to the land, and talks were held between the Civil Aviation Board and the State Land Administration Board in Brisbane to decide how the aerodrome and its environs would be transferred.⁹⁰⁵ The Cook Shire Council held most of the land under various tenures, and was willing to transfer the lot to the Commonwealth. Several roads close to the racecourse drome posed a threat to safety, though the Land Administration Board offered to close all streets and roads in the area and issue a Special Lease to the Commonwealth Government for an aerodrome.⁹⁰⁶

⁹⁰³ V. Augenson, Inspector of Aerodromes, to Civil Aviation Board, 14 September 1936. B595/120 65/97/16 pt.1. Australian Archives.

⁹⁰⁴ V. Augenson, Inspector of Aerodromes, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 14 September 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁰⁵ S.H. Crawford, Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Melbourne, to The Under Secretary for Lands, Brisbane, 20 October 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁰⁶ Secretary, Land Administration Board, Department of Public Lands, Brisbane, to The Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Department of Defence, Melbourne, 28 September 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.



Aerial view of Cooktown racecourse showing ditches to prevent enemy aircraft landing during the war. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).

The Council's tenacity was rewarded when the Civil Aviation Board announced that Cooktown would be a regular port of call on the New Guinea run.⁹⁰⁷ Further confirmation of the project came with advice that the Commonwealth Government intended taking over the Cooktown aerodrome and improving it to meet departmental requirements.⁹⁰⁸

Two-faced Bureaucracy: Obfuscation or Deception?

At this time the Cooktown aerodrome appears to have fallen victim to either bureaucratic or political intrigue. Despite assurances to the Council by various Government departments that the racecourse aerodrome would be taken over and expanded, some public servants were concerned about both the land tenure and the suitability of the racecourse site. Unknown to the locals, Inspector Augenson was again told to search for an alternative site over which the Commonwealth could secure full control.⁹⁰⁹ The saltpan site was the only possible alternative, and he estimated that at least £8,600 would be needed to build a suitable aerodrome, compared with the £5,200 to construct two runways at the racecourse site. Despite his earlier rejection of the saltpan site, he now regarded it as superior, as it had better

⁹⁰⁷ S.H. Crawford, Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Department of Defence, Melbourne, to A.S. Sampson, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 3 February 1937. Cook Shire Council Archive, Cooktown.

⁹⁰⁸ F. Strahan, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, Canberra, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 5 February 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁰⁹ Telegram from A.V.I.A.T., to Augenson, Inspector of Aerodromes, Thursday Island, 30 October 1936. B595/120 65/97/16 pt.1. Australian Archives.

approaches, and had more room for expansion.⁹¹⁰ It is difficult to understand why Augenson changed his mind about the saltpan site, especially given its later unfortunate history and eventual abandonment. In fact he knew the area was too boggy to develop successfully, an opinion that was subsequently proved correct. Augensen twice rejected the saltpan site because it was too soft, and reversed this opinion only after he was ordered to do a third inspection. Possibly he finally bowed to pressure to furnish a report in line with the wishes of his superiors. Not all bureaucrats were in favour of the new site, however. The Controller of Ground Organisation for the Defence Department considered that the extra expense was not justified.⁹¹¹

The Government urgently wanted a decision on which site to develop, as the Cooktown aerodrome was needed to service the new Sydney to New Guinea air service. The service was scheduled to commence in December 1937, and in late February of that year Engineering Inspector Yeaman inspected the saltpan site. He agreed that it was superior to the racecourse, but that it would require extensive engineering works.⁹¹² He estimated that it would cost £11,000 to develop, including £800 for a rest house for passengers and crew, and

⁹¹⁰ Telegram from Augenson, to Civil Aviation Board, Defence Department, Melbourne, 19 November 1936. B595/120 65/97/16 pt. 1. V. Augenson, Inspector of Aerodromes, Cairns, to Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, 26 November 1936. B595/120 65/97/ pt.1. Australian Archives.

⁹¹¹ Minute Paper from Controller of Ground Organization, Department of Defence, to Civil Aviation Board, 8 December 1936. B595/120 65/97/pt. 1. Australian Archives.

⁹¹² Telegram from Yeaman, Commercial Hotel, Cooktown, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, 8 March 1937. B595/120 65/97/pt. 1. Australian Archives.

that it could be completed in six months.⁹¹³ The Civil Aviation Board accepted the report, and orders were given for the Works Director to prepare plans and specifications.⁹¹⁴

It is apparent that the Council and citizens of Cooktown were being deceived by officers of various Government departments about their intentions for the aerodrome, and perhaps also by Government Members or Ministers. While Defence Department engineers investigated the saltpan site, its officers assured the Council that the purchase of the racecourse site was imminent. The Shire Chairman told the Director of Aviation in late December 1936 that the Council had completed all requirements for the transfer of the land.⁹¹⁵ This was obviously the appropriate time for the Council to be notified that an alternative site was under consideration, but the Director's reply was evasive, in that it merely said that he "would advise earliest possible regarding your aerodrome".⁹¹⁶ The deception continued, with the Council receiving more assurances that the Racecourse site would be purchased by the Commonwealth.⁹¹⁷

⁹¹³ Phone call from Yeaman, to Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, 12 March 1937. B595/120 65/97/ pt. 1. Australian Archives.

⁹¹⁴ Lettergram from Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, to Works Director, Department of Interior, Brisbane, 17 March 1937. B595/120 65/97/ pt. 1. Australian Archives.

⁹¹⁵ Telegram from Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Director Aviation, Care Aviat, Melbourne. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹¹⁶ Telegram from A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, to Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 22 December 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹¹⁷ For instance the Council was told in early April that officers would soon arrive in Cooktown to finalise the transfer. One week later Council was asked to advise the conditions for acquisition. S.H. Crawford, Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Melbourne, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 1 April 1937. A. Percival, for Secretary, Property and Survey Branch, Department Of The Interior, Canberra, 7 April 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Some Members of the Commonwealth Parliament were also deceived. For instance, Senator J.S. Collings was told in February 1937 that 'There would appear to be little doubt, therefore, that the aerodrome will be improved by the Commonwealth'.⁹¹⁸ A similar assurance was given to the Minister Administering War Service Homes.⁹¹⁹ The deception, if indeed a deception was intended, involved the highest office in the land. The Prime Minister's Office assured the Council that "it is proposed to take over the aerodrome at present controlled by your Council and improve it to meet departmental requirements".⁹²⁰

As he was working in Cooktown, and in close liaison with officers of the Shire Council, Inspector Yeaman was in an invidious position. He knew that the Government was now committed to the saltpan site, but that the Shire Council, ignorant of the change, was still working to transfer the racecourse land to the Government. In an effort to clarify the situation, he asked the Department if it intended acquiring both sites.⁹²¹ The Civil Aviation Board replied that only the saltpan site was under consideration.⁹²²

⁹¹⁸ M.L. Shepherd, Secretary, Department of Defence, Melbourne, to Senator J.S. Collings, Commonwealth Offices, Brisbane, 4 February 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹¹⁹ Archdale Parkhill, Department of Defence, Sydney, to The Hon. J.A.J. Hunter, M.P., Minister Administering War Service Homes, Commonwealth Offices, Brisbane, 5 February 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹²⁰ F. Strahan, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 5 February 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹²¹ Telegram from Yeaman, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, 14 April 1937. B595/120 65/97/ pt. 1. Australian Archives.

⁹²² Telegram from Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, to Yeaman, Civil Aviation Department, Cooktown, 14 April 1937. B595/120 65/97/ pt. 1. Australian Archives.

The evidence suggests that Government officers were involved in a deception to secure the saltpan site. It is obvious that members of the bureaucracy and officers of the Defence Department were more aware of the threat of war than were many of the politicians. Given this scenario, it is possible that the "hawks" in these departments were willing to deceive their political masters in order to build an aerodrome more suitable for defence purposes than was possible at the racecourse site.

The Shire Council was not told that a new site had been chosen until April 1937.⁹²³ Eventually, Council and local residents alike applauded the building of the airfield at the saltpan site. However, the delay in telling the Council of the change undoubtedly cost it time and money it could not afford. Council officers wasted time facilitating the transfer of the racecourse land while senior Departmental officers in charge of planning and constructing the new airfield knew the exercise was futile. The deception was especially reprehensible because at this time the Cook Shire Council was short of funds.

Aerodrome No. 2: The saltpan site.

The acquisition of the land for the new aerodrome was gazetted on 8 September 1937, when an area of about 370 acres, mostly tidal saltpan, was acquired for public purposes, namely: "Defence Purposes,

⁹²³ Telegram from Department Interior, Canberra, to Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 14 April 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

at Cooktown, Queensland".⁹²⁴ The land was adjacent to the Cooktown to Laura railway line, approximately two miles from Cooktown. In a display of support for the proposed new aerodrome, the Shire Council offered to install "Electric energy for the Aerodrome and Direction Finder". For a yearly fee the Council would install large, modern, and thoroughly reliable power units.⁹²⁵ Although the Civil Aviation Board intended to use electric power at the aerodrome for night landing, this would not be necessary for at least one year. It explained that electric power would be used initially only for the radio facilities, and this would be provided by its own 150 K.W.H. generator.⁹²⁶ The Council dropped the idea, but ironically it purchased electricity from the aerodrome after the war.

Although the saltpan site looked good on the surface - it needed little clearing or levelling - the engineers experienced early problems with the clay foundation, which they found difficult to compact.⁹²⁷ The

⁹²⁴ Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, No. 52, 16 September 1937.

⁹²⁵ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Dept. of Defence, Melbourne, 3 November 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. This offer must be viewed with suspicion. The Council had no money to provide electricity for its own building, let alone an aerodrome.

⁹²⁶ S.H. Crawford, Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Department of Defence, Melbourne, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 22 November 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. It is interesting to note that while the Council's offer to supply electricity to the aerodrome in 1937 was not accepted, the first electricity supply to the town came from the Civil Aviation Department generators at the Cooktown aerodrome.

⁹²⁷ Telegram from Yeaman, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, 5 May 1937. B595/120: 65/97/pt. 1. Australian Archives.

problem was sufficient for Inspector Yeaman to be given yet another order to try to find other possible sites within ten miles of the town.⁹²⁸ He found none, but suggested that the saltpan surface could be made operational by providing a compacted gravel base course, and a drain to prevent flooding at high tides.⁹²⁹ His superiors agreed, but decided that a levee bank would be more appropriate than the proposed drain on the southern boundary.⁹³⁰

While the engineers were dealing with the problems of providing safe landing grounds for aircraft, tenders were called for an operator to provide the airline service to New Guinea. The successful applicant, R.W. Carpenter and Company, announced that the service would call at Port Moresby, Salamaua and Rabaul in New Guinea, as well as its Australian points of call. It would carry mail and passengers on the run, using three DM86B aircraft, flying 2,522 miles each way once weekly.⁹³¹ The new service was planned to start in December 1937.

The Civil Aviation Board faced two major problems in having the drome ready for the new service. The Government had to get title to the land so that work could commence. If this was not done soon enough, it would face the second problem, which was that the wet season could

⁹²⁸ Telegram from Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, to Yeaman, Inspector Aerodromes, Cooktown, 11 May 1937. B595/120 65/97/ pt. 1. Australian Archives.

⁹²⁹ Telegram from Yeaman, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, 13 May 1937. B595/120 65/97/ pt. 1. Australian Archives.

⁹³⁰ Telegram from Yeaman, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, 25 May 1937. B595/120 65/97/ pt. 1. Australian Archives.

⁹³¹ Memorandum from M.L. Shepherd, Secretary, Department of Defence, Melbourne, to Comptroller- General of Customs, Department of Trade and Customs, Canberra, 15 June 1937, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

hinder work later in the year. The Government knew it could do nothing about the coming wet season, but it solved the problem of land tenure by using its powers of compulsory acquisition. The transfer was formalised in the Commonwealth Gazette in September.⁹³² While the land problem was being addressed, tenders were called early to allow contractors to get machinery to the site, and a bid from T.M. Prior of Pawngilly for £7895 was accepted.⁹³³ Fortunately, work could proceed immediately on areas owned by the Crown or the local authority, and the contractor was able to clear away mangroves and begin construction work on most levee banks and drains, and the south-east runway.⁹³⁴ As a precaution against the entry of exotic diseases such as foot and mouth from New Guinea, the aerodrome was also fenced to prevent wild pigs and goats from entering the area.⁹³⁵

The construction plan included extensive engineering to protect the runways from flooding at high tides. A bund wall was formed around most of the perimeter of the landing ground, and a series of valves and gates were installed to drain rain water from the airfield. Despite these precautions, the aprons became soft at high tides and during rainy periods, and pilots required considerable skill to avoid disaster.⁹³⁶ During the Second World War several planes were bogged on the strip,

⁹³² Commonwealth Gazette, No. 52, 16 September 1937.

⁹³³ Lettergram from Yeaman, to C.A.B., Melbourne, 9 August 1937. B595/120 65/97/pt. 2. Australian Archives.

⁹³⁴ Department of Defence Minute Paper, 23 August 1937. B595/120 65/97/pt. 2. Australian Archives.

⁹³⁵ E.C. Johnston, Controller of Civil Aviation, to Dr. J.H. Cumpston, Director-General of Health, Department of Health, Canberra, 3 September 1937. B595/120 65/97/pt. 2. Australian Archives.

⁹³⁶ Sinclair, Cooktown At War, p. 7.

and although nobody was hurt, the strip's defence capabilities were compromised.⁹³⁷

Although the supervising engineer was satisfied with the rate of construction, other professionals were not happy with any aspect of the project. For instance, in early November F.W. Stevens, a Departmental engineer, issued a report identifying many problems with the saltpan site, and said the aerodrome should have been situated near the mouth of the Annan River. He thought the saltpan was too soft, and predicted that if any large aircraft ran off the end of the runway it would disappear into the mud. To reinforce his claim he pointed out that after nine months of dry weather, construction machinery was still bogging. Stevens identified further problems, including the absence of a suitable radio site in the vicinity of the aerodrome, and two small hills that could hinder the approach to the field.⁹³⁸ This report received little support at the time but it proved prophetic. The Civil Aerodrome, as it became known, was eventually abandoned by the armed forces during the Second World War for the very failings Stevens identified.

By early February 1938 the aerodrome was still not complete. The contractor ran out of funds and relinquished the job, and the engineer-in-charge asked permission to complete the strip with day labour.⁹³⁹ By

⁹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-39.

⁹³⁸ F.W. Stevens R.I., to Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Melbourne, 2 November 1937. B595/120: 65/97/pt. 2. Australian Archives.

⁹³⁹ Telegram from Mowbray, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, 10 February 1938. B595/120 65/97/pt. 2. Australian Archives.

the end of March all runways were ready for use, and prior to the official opening of the aerodrome, Tom McDonald used the landing ground several times and found it satisfactory.⁹⁴⁰ The Cook Shire Council planned an official opening ceremony, and asked the Governor of Queensland, Sir Leslie Wilson, to "do the honours" on the first official flight on 4 May 1938.⁹⁴¹ The first official landing on the new aerodrome, by Carpenter's airline, was marked by the issue of a commemorative post card, copies of which were sent to officials and "important" people. Bill Riordan, the local Federal Member, thanked the Council for sending him one and said he believed the new air service would play an important part in rehabilitating Cooktown.⁹⁴²

Appointing a Customs Officer.

Cooktown was now the first Australian port of call on the New Guinea service, and needed a Customs agent to clear passengers and freight. However, what should have been a simple task of appointing a Customs Officer approximated a theatrical farce. As the anticipated trade would not warrant a permanent Officer, the Customs service suggested that a part-time agent would be appropriate. The position

⁹⁴⁰ Telegram from Mowbray, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, March 1938. B595/120 65/97/pt2. Australian Archives.

⁹⁴¹ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Jack Mowbray, Civil Aviation Dept., Archerfield Aerodrome, Brisbane, 30 March 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁴² Bill Riordan, Federal Members' Rooms, Commonwealth Offices, Brisbane, to Mr. S. Murray, Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 6 April 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

was offered to the Postmaster.⁹⁴³ When he refused the appointment, various State Government officers were approached.⁹⁴⁴ This was no more successful. The Police magistrate said he was too busy, as he was also the Acting Mining Warden and Mining Registrar. The Police Commissioner was no more accommodating, advising that Cooktown had only one Police Officer, and he had no spare time to perform extra duties.⁹⁴⁵

The Comptroller-General of Customs then suggested that when a caretaker was appointed to the aerodrome he could act as part-time Customs officer.⁹⁴⁶ Consequently, when W.H. Baker was given the job of caretaker, he was told that he would be paid an additional salary to perform Customs duties.⁹⁴⁷ Baker refused, as he had no book-keeping experience and was not confident of his ability to perform the job. The Customs Department had run out of time and of likely candidates, and sent a permanent officer to Cooktown until a temporary agent could be appointed.⁹⁴⁸

⁹⁴³ Memorandum from Collector of Customs, Customs and Excise Office, Brisbane, to The Comptroller-General of Customs, Canberra, 8 march 1937, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁴⁴ Minute Paper from The Senior Clerk to The Comptroller-General of Customs, 17 August 1937, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁴⁵ Memorandum from Collector of Customs to The Comptroller-General, 24 September 1937, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁴⁶ Memorandum from E. Abbott, Comptroller-General of Customs to The Director-General, Postmaster-General's Department, Melbourne, 18 October 1937, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁴⁷ Memorandum from Secretary, Civil Aviation Board to Mr W.H. Baker, Caretaker, Government Aerodrome, Cooktown, 3 May 1938, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁴⁸ Memorandum from J.J. Barry, Acting Collector of Customs, Queensland to Comptroller-General of Customs, Canberra, F.C.T., 16 June 1938, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

By late September 1938 the Customs Department had two contenders vying for the position of acting Customs agent. When Allan Bath, the meteorologist attached to the aerodrome at Cooktown was first offered the position, he refused. However, he later changed his mind, and said he would take the job at £39 per year. The Shire Clerk, who had also been approached, wanted £100, but revised this to £52 when he was told of Bath's offer. Although the Shire Clerk was more experienced, having previously been employed as a shipping clerk, Bath was chosen for the job.⁹⁴⁹ However, further confusion arose when the Commonwealth Meteorologist refused to allow Bath to accept the position.

The Shire Clerk was then offered the position at £52 per year.⁹⁵⁰ He asked for the Council's approval to carry out these duties, which were expected to take "an hour or an hour and a half per week".⁹⁵¹ Despite having sufficient spare time to handle the work, he was refused permission. Ironically, the Postmaster was once again suggested.⁹⁵² Luckily, the Postmaster-General revised his opinion, and this time approved the appointment of the Cooktown Postmaster as Acting

⁹⁴⁹ Memorandum from M.M.A. Marrinan, Sub-Collector of Customs to The Acting Collector of Customs, Queensland, Brisbane, 30 September 1938, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁵⁰ Memorandum from J.J. Barry, Acting Controller of Customs, Queensland to Comptroller-General of Customs, Canberra, A.C.T., 19 October 1938, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁵¹ S. Murray, Cooktown, to The Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 8 November 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁵² Telegram from TRACUSTOMS, Canberra to J.J. Barry, 17 November 1938, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

Officer of Customs.⁹⁵³ The farce occurred not because of a lack of suitable people available for the job, but because of the bureaucratic view that only "respectable" people should be offered a quasi-official position such as Customs Officer. This view is still common in small towns like Cooktown.

The Racecourse drome closure.

After the new airport was commissioned, the Government did not wish the original aerodrome to become completely redundant. While the Racecourse landing strip was too small for regular use by larger aircraft, the Civil Aviation Authority wanted to keep it in repair for emergency use, and offered to pay the Shire Council to maintain it.⁹⁵⁴ This suited the Council, as the new landing ground was further from town, and retaining the Racecourse aerodrome would allow small planes to land close to town, especially for mercy flights.⁹⁵⁵ However, within a year, the Government decided that the Racecourse aerodrome was redundant and relinquished its interest.⁹⁵⁶ The Council couldn't afford to keep the drome open, and in 1946 the Racecourse Reserve

⁹⁵³ G.T. Chippendale, for The Director-General, Postmaster-General's Department, to The Comptroller-General, Trade and Customs Department, Canberra, A.C.T., 2 March 1939, A425 1938/8085, Australian Archives.

⁹⁵⁴ J. Mowbray, Inspector of Aerodromes, Cairns, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 29 September 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁵⁵ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, to J. Mowbray, Inspector of Aerodromes, Archerfield, 10 October 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁵⁶ J. Mowbray, Inspector of Aerodromes, Archerfield, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 10 February 1939. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

was returned to the Cooktown Hack Race Club.⁹⁵⁷ The Council had spent a significant amount of its own funds to acquire land for the Racecourse strip, and much of it was not recoverable. Once again, Government authorities had acted in an arbitrary manner, wasting resources that Cooktown could ill afford.

Problems with the new strip.

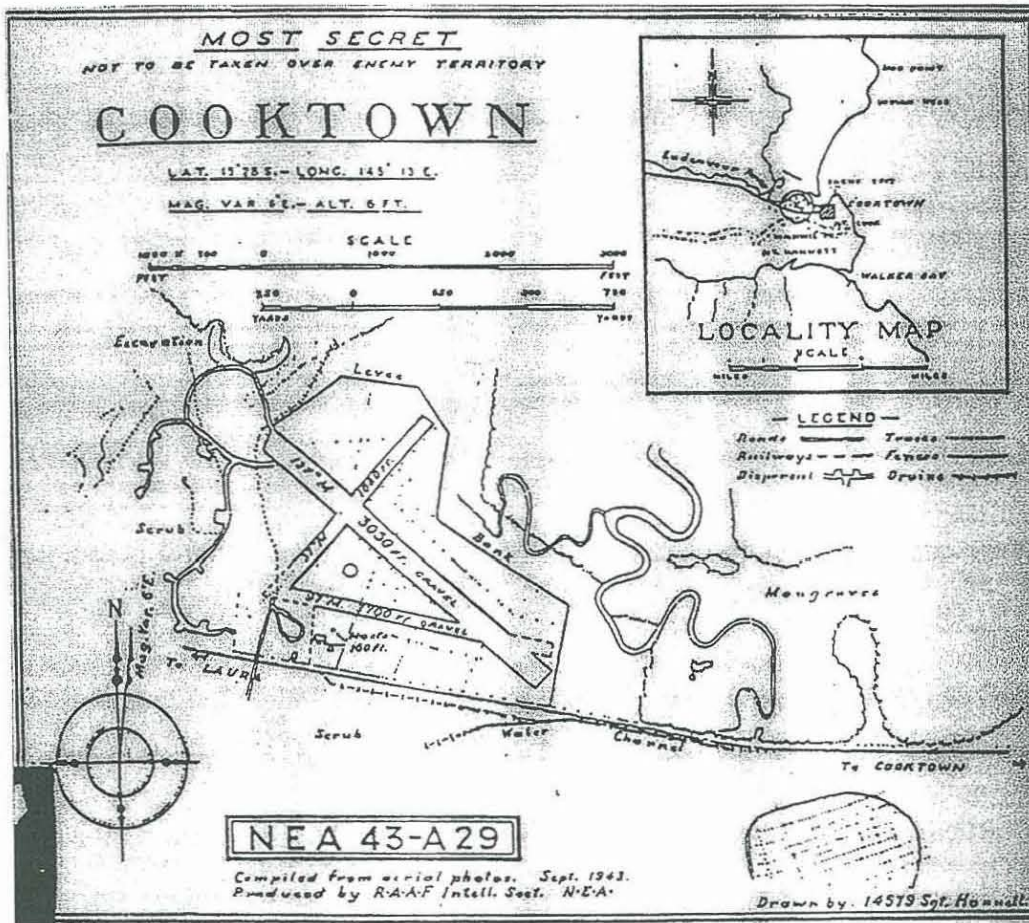
Despite the euphoria surrounding the new aerodrome, deficiencies in construction and engineering soon became apparent. For instance, even before the official opening ceremony, an extra £1,685 was spent on drainage works. Problems continued, and soon after the aerodrome was officially opened, a further £300 was needed to apply screenings to the surface of the runway, as mud was clogging the wheels of aircraft using the strip.⁹⁵⁸ Similar problems were encountered in other areas, prompting an officer of the Defence Department to comment that insufficient care had been taken in the selection of some aerodrome sites, including Cairns and Cooktown.⁹⁵⁹

Although the aerodrome continued to experience problems, the engineer who made the final inspection following the end of the

⁹⁵⁷ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Secretary, Land Administration Board, Department for Public Lands, Brisbane, 15 October 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁵⁸ Telegram from Interior to Defence, Melbourne, 7 June 1938. B595/120 65/97. pt. 2. Australian Archives.

⁹⁵⁹ Department of Defence Minute Paper, 28 April 1938. B595/120 65/97/pt. 2. Australian Archives.



Plan of Cooktown Civil Aerodrome, 1943. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).

maintenance period considered the contractor had done a very good job. He conceded that some areas of the surface were soft, but these were expected to cure over time.⁹⁶⁰ However, his confidence was not justified, and in February 1939 the plane *Corinthia* bogged on landing. The condition of the strip was so bad that until the taxiways and aprons were repaired, planes had to be refuelled on the runway.⁹⁶¹ The continued requests for funding to repair the runways and levee banks led to discussions between engineers from the Works Department and the Department of Civil Aviation, who decided to extend the runways to 1,000 yards and widen them to 150 feet.⁹⁶²

Cooktown complains about the air service.

Despite the problems associated with the new strip, the benefits of having a regular air service by large aircraft were immediately obvious. By March 1939, Airlines of Australia was offering a deferred freighting system to Cooktown, whereby freight would be accepted at Cairns and forwarded when space was available. The company thought that freight would not be delayed more than one day in Cairns, and freight rates would be set at 2.5 pence per pound.⁹⁶³ The service was initially

⁹⁶⁰ K.M. Travis, Engineer, Brisbane, to The Secretary, Civil Aviation Board, Department of Defence, Melbourne, 10 June 1938. B595/120 65/97. pt. 2. Australian Archives.

⁹⁶¹ Telegram from Amos, to A.V.I.A.T., Melbourne, 27 February 1939. B595/120 65/97. pt. 3. Australian Archives.

⁹⁶² Memorandum from A.B. Corbett, Director-General of Civil Aviation, to The Director-General of Works, Canberra, 4 April, 1939. B595/120 65/97. pt. 3. Australian Archives.

⁹⁶³ Norman P. Draper, Managing Director, Airlines Of Australia Ltd., Cairns, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 17 March 1939. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

appreciated by the people of Cooktown, but by late 1940 the Council complained that the Company was providing only one service each fortnight. In contrast, Tom McDonald still flew to Cooktown on an almost daily basis.⁹⁶⁴ The complaints about Airlines of Australia continued, but were finally rejected by the Director-General of Civil Aviation. After a full investigation he found that during the three months January to March 1941, the Company had flown the scheduled three times per week, arriving on time except for three occasions. Two of these delays were due to bad weather at Cairns, and the third was caused by poor weather while the aircraft was on another run. In all cases the Company provided a service on the following day. He said that over fifty trips between Cooktown and Cairns had been provided during the quarter, far in excess of the thirty-nine scheduled for that period.⁹⁶⁵

Cooktown dropped from New Guinea run.

Cooktown received a considerable boost to its economy and its morale by the construction of the new aerodrome and the commencement of the Australia-New Guinea air service. However, the bubble soon burst. In April 1941, R.W. Carpenter announced that it would make its final port of call in Cairns instead of Cooktown. The company said that it would introduce a larger plane to the run, and that Cooktown would be

⁹⁶⁴ Shire Clerk, Cooktown, to The Chairman, Liquid Fuel Control Board, Brisbane, 7 October 1940. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁶⁵ A.B. Corbett, Director-General of Civil Aviation, Department Of Civil Aviation, Melbourne, to The Shire Clerk, Cooktown Shire Council, Cooktown, 14 May 1941. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

dropped from the service.⁹⁶⁶ This action delivered a severe blow to the Cooktown economy, as the airline brought passengers to the town, and provided work for locals in servicing the aircraft.

The loss of Carpenter's run had flow-on effects that further disadvantaged Cooktown's economy. The Central Meteorological Bureau decided it could no longer justify a presence in Cooktown, and the Observer and Meteorological Officer were transferred to Cairns.⁹⁶⁷ The local Federal Member, Bill Riordan M.H.R., tried to have the decision reversed, but the Minister for Civil Aviation would not budge. He said that Cairns had a far greater level of air movements than Cooktown, and the change was warranted. However, the town was not without a meteorological service for long. Soon after the departure of the civilian meteorologist, the armed forces employed their own meteorology service at Cooktown throughout the war.⁹⁶⁸

World War Two.

The advent of World War Two vindicated the claims that Cooktown was an important strategic area for Australia's defence. The R.A.A.F. believed the Cooktown aerodrome was critical to Australia's war effort, and within one week of the declaration of war, the Works Department

⁹⁶⁶ J. McEwen, Minister for Civil Aviation, Canberra, to W.J. Riordan, M.P., Federal Members' Rooms, Commonwealth Offices, Brisbane, 5 May 1941. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁶⁷ H.N. Warren, Acting Director, Central Meteorological Bureau, Melbourne, to The Divisional Meteorologist, Brisbane, 1 April 1941, BP 355/3.0. P655, Australian Archives.

⁹⁶⁸ Sinclair, Cooktown At War, p. 80.

allocated £4,884 for the extension and widening of number one runway.⁹⁶⁹ Officers of the Main Roads Commission, who had much experience in civil construction in remote areas, regarded this as insufficient. They estimated that the improvements would cost £6,965 and would take at least six months to complete.⁹⁷⁰ When tenders were called the Commission proved to be too pessimistic, as Tanner and Kenny contracted the work for £5,200.⁹⁷¹

After an air force base was established in Townsville in 1940 the squadron Commander called for further improvements to the Cairns and Cooktown airfields, and for refuelling and re-arming facilities to be available there. Both airfields were used by aircraft ferrying supplies to bases in Cape York Peninsula and New Guinea, and £10,000 was allocated for the extension and widening of all runways at Cooktown. The Civil Aviation Authority offered to extend all runways to the maximum length possible, and fix the drainage problems.⁹⁷² The Queensland Main Roads Commission undertook the construction work, and hoped to hire local machinery. They found little reliable machinery was available in the area, except for a small tractor and a grader owned by the Council. Some motor trucks were also available from

⁹⁶⁹ A.B. Corbett to Director-General of Works, Department of the Interior, Canberra, 8 September 1939, MT7/1/0 D788, pt. 1, Australian Archives.

⁹⁷⁰ Telegram from Barker to Comworks, Canberra, 6 November 1939, MT7 D788, pt. 1, Australian Archives.

⁹⁷¹ Contract let to Tanner & Kenny, Yungaburra, Queensland, for Runway Reconstruction and Drainage, 1 April 1940, MT7 D788, pt. 1, Australian Archives.

⁹⁷² Memorandum from A.R. McComb, for Director-General of Civil Aviation, to The Secretary, Department of Air, Melbourne, 15 May 1941. B595/120 65/97, pt. 3, Australian Archives.

private individuals, in addition to a few horse drawn vehicles.⁹⁷³ All suitable machinery was hired by the authorities, including a tractor owned by a German missionary and farmer, Pastor G.M. Schwarz. Ironically, this tractor was hired throughout the war years, even though Schwarz was interned for a time as an enemy alien.

Despite the "phony war" mentality that had existed in much of Australia following the declaration of war with Germany, the Council and people of Cooktown took the situation very seriously. Even before the *Department of Defence* considered placing *Armed Forces* guards on vulnerable facilities, a volunteer guard detachment was placed on the aerodrome and wireless station at Cooktown. Personnel for this Guard were provided by the Cooktown Rifle Club, which had been designated a "Vulnerable Point" Guard in June 1939.⁹⁷⁴ The Council lobbied for guns for the guard, and a professional officer to train them and supervise their activities. The Council also wanted to know its responsibilities and powers in the event of an emergency.⁹⁷⁵

The authorities must have taken the threat to Cooktown seriously, because the civilian guard was soon replaced by military personnel. The first contingent comprised a guard of one officer and sixteen other

⁹⁷³ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Officer in Charge, Main Roads Commission, Cairns, 10 June 1941. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁷⁴ G.A. Street, Minister for the Army, to W.J.F. Riordan, M.P., Federal Members' Rooms, Commonwealth Offices, Brisbane, Q'ld., 8 June 1940. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁷⁵ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to H.H. Collins, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 4 September 1939. Telegram from Gaiter, Shire Clerk, to Officer Charge Northern Command, Brisbane, 12 June 1940. Transcripts in Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

ranks, who were responsible for protecting the aerodrome from possible sabotage. When they arrived, the base had no water supply and no accommodation facilities. A few months later, when Flight Lieutenant Yeaman made an inspection, he found that beds and bedding had still not been provided. There was still no permanent water supply, and deliveries were made by the Shire Council for 5/6d. per 1,000 gallons. Latrines had been provided and were serviced by the Council.⁹⁷⁶ Not everyone thought the guard was necessary, however. A secret intelligence report in 1940 said that there was no real threat to the aerodrome, and recommended that the guard be withdrawn.⁹⁷⁷ This view was not supported by Northern Command, who succeeded in convincing the Defence Department to keep the guard in place.⁹⁷⁸

The aerodrome was a few miles from the town, and this first contingent of service personnel caused little impact on Cooktown's economy. The Council received a small boost from the provision of water and sanitary services to the camp, and the guards spent some of their income in the town's hotels, cafes, and the local movies. As the base expanded, a few new cafes were opened to provide for the extra trade.

⁹⁷⁶ The Shire Council had to extend the boundaries of the area it could legally service to accommodate the needs of the Defence Department. Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, Dept. of Health & Home Affairs, Brisbane, 13 October 1941. By the end of 1941 sanitary services were being provided to defence units at the Aerodrome, the Hospital, the Direction Finder and the wharf. List of services supplied to Department of Defence, Cooktown by the Cook Shire Council, 1941. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. Sinclair, *Cooktown At War*, p. 9.

⁹⁷⁷ "Secret" Report by Director of Military Operations and Intelligence on Cooktown Aerodrome, Qld: Guarding Arrangements, 16 November 1940, MP729/6 25/401/238, Australian Archives.

⁹⁷⁸ Memorandum from J.T. Fitzgerald, Secretary, Department of Defence, to Secretary, Department of Air, 11 June 1941, MP729/6 25/401/238, Australian Archives.

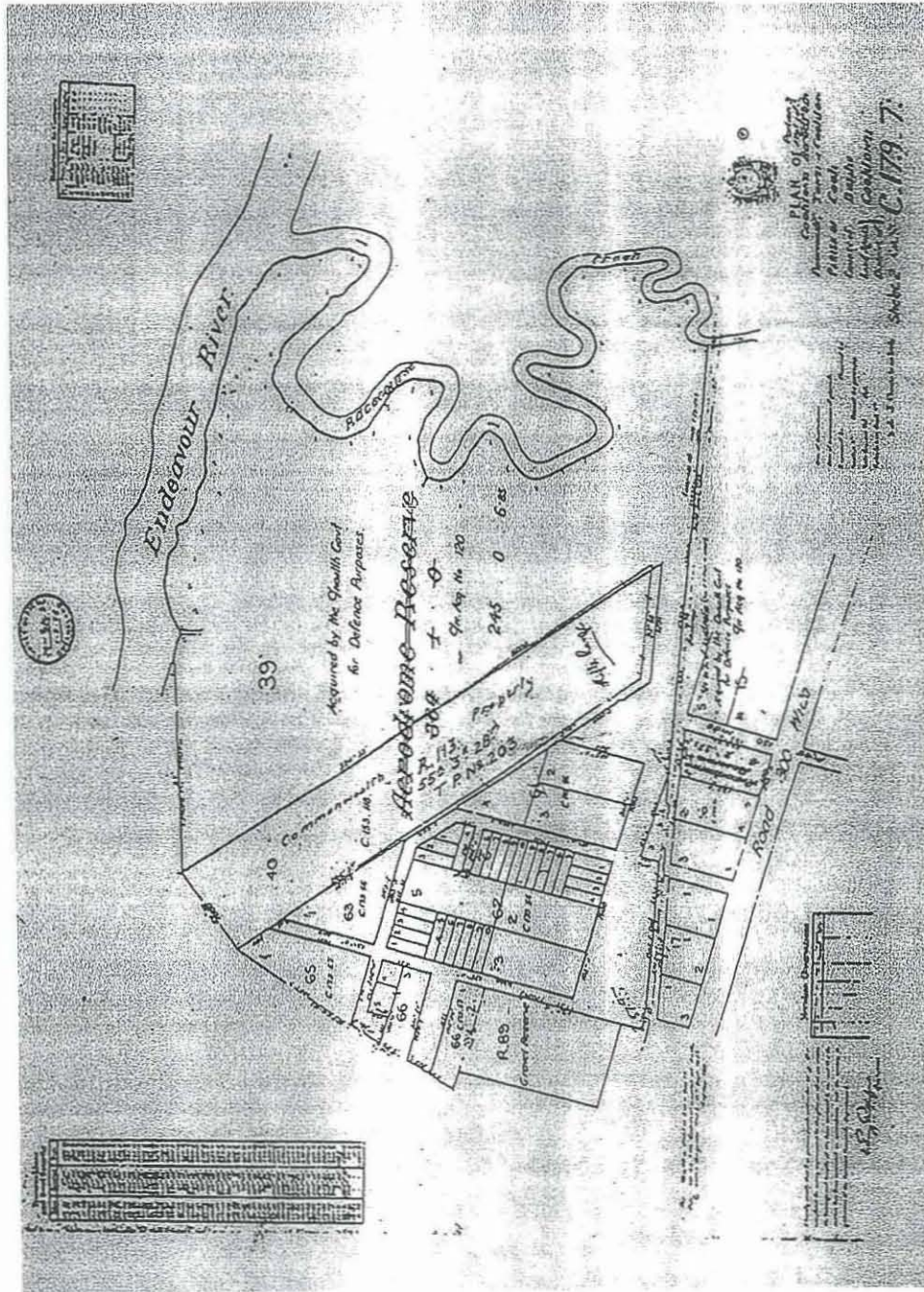
The expectation that Japan would soon enter into the war precipitated the upgrading of Cooktown's airport, and £10,000 was allocated to extend and strengthen the surfaces of the three runways.⁹⁷⁹ Machinery was rushed to Cooktown, and work commenced on the improvements. By January 1942 the taxiways and dispersal areas had been completed, and work was in hand to move essential infrastructure such as radio and generating equipment to underground bunkers. The control of the Cooktown aerodrome was then transferred from the Civil Aviation Authority to the Royal Australian Air Force, and the base became known as Advanced Operational Base Cooktown.⁹⁸⁰ The first permanent R.A.A.F. unit at Cooktown, the 27 Operational Base Unit, consisted of three officers and over fifty other ranks. Their transfer was not well organised, and initially even food was in short supply. Accommodation and other facilities were rudimentary, with some personnel housed in railway carriages parked on a loop line close to the aerodrome. The situation became even more chaotic during the Coral Sea Battle, when the Cooktown aerodrome became one of the bases for air operations against the Japanese fleet.⁹⁸¹

The Allied side was successful in halting the Japanese advance in the Coral Sea Battle, and the Cooktown aerodrome played its part,

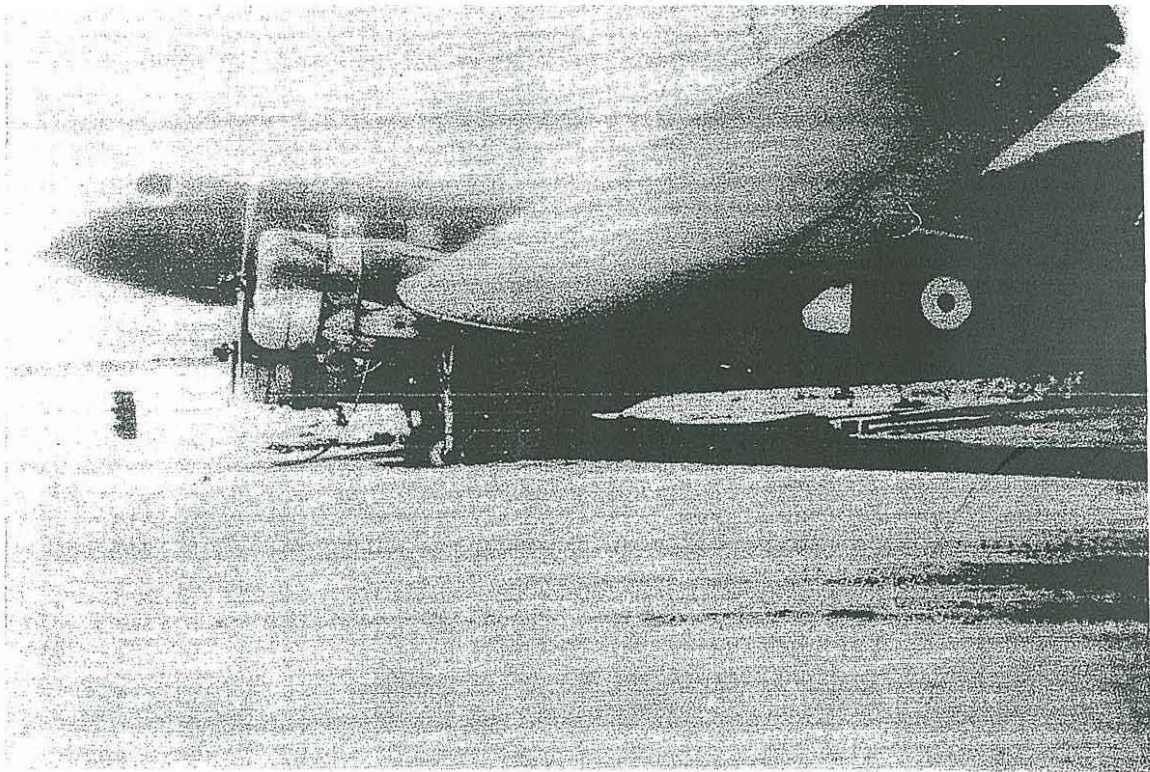
⁹⁷⁹ Memorandum from A.R. McComb, for Director-General of Civil Aviation, to The Secretary, Department of Air, Melbourne, 15 May 1941, B595/120 65/97/16, pt. 3. Australian Archives.

⁹⁸⁰ Sinclair, *Cooktown At War*, p. 11.

⁹⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 17. Claims were made that the Japanese fleet was first sighted by aircraft flown from Cooktown aerodrome. p. 54.



Plan of Rifle Range tidal saltpan site, 1937. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).



Plane bogged on Civil Aerodrome during War, 1942. (Sinclair,
Cooktown At War).

although it was shown to be deficient for handling heavy aircraft. Problem areas were identified, and a contract for another £10,000 was awarded to Tanner and Kenny to extend the runways to make the strip safer. However, under a Government directive to eliminate waste in allocating resources, the job was given to the Main Roads Commission.⁹⁸² Even after these improvements were made, the Civil Aerodrome was not considered safe. The northern approach was hindered by two small hills, making landings and take-offs hazardous.⁹⁸³ The limited facilities were also incapable of accommodating the influx of an increasing number of both Australian and United States aircraft and personnel. In the face of these difficulties, the authorities decided to find another site.

Aerodrome No. 3: The Mission Drome.

In May 1942 Pilot Officer Jim Trench inspected sites at Laura and on the Endeavour River for an alternative aerodrome. He found Laura too isolated, and chose the Endeavour River site, about six miles from Cooktown. The property consisted principally of a farm owned by Pastor Schwarz, a Lutheran Missionary. Schwarz was interned as an enemy alien at the same time his farm was identified as the most

⁹⁸² Before work could commence an agreement was made for the contractors to "swap" the Cooktown job for a contract to extend an aerodrome in Cloncurry, where they already had machinery. The Cooktown contract was carried out by the Main Roads Commission with machinery already in the area. C.A. Hoy, Director-General of Works, Department of Interior, Melbourne, to Secretary, Department of Interior, Canberra, 15 January 1942. BP342/1/0 5865/325/1903. Australian Archives.

⁹⁸³ Pilots complained of the hazardous approach, and it was also reported by the Main Roads construction engineers. The History of the Queensland Main Roads

appropriate site for the aerodrome.⁹⁸⁴ While no evidence was found to indicate that Schwarz was interned to facilitate the seizure of his property, the timing of both incidents would suggest some connection. When this strip, known as the Mission Aerodrome, was commissioned, it became the third aerodrome constructed in the Cooktown area in a period of less than ten years. The Government finally settled with Schwarz in 1952, paying him £455 for loss of stock and possessions, and the residue of rent owing on the property.⁹⁸⁵ The property was rented for £12 per month from 1 June 1942.⁹⁸⁶ He also received £3,000 for the land taken for the aerodrome, a total of 1,000 acres.⁹⁸⁷

In contrast to the procrastination shown in upgrading the Civil Aerodrome earlier in the war, the construction of the Mission Aerodrome proceeded swiftly. Within one week of Trench inspecting the site, work had begun on the project. By August 1942 the strip was cleared for 7,700 feet with grading and first course gravelling for 7,000 feet, and camp facilities were under construction. The strip was ready for use by September 1942.⁹⁸⁸ Security was provided by B Company, 3rd Infantry Brigade, whose orders were to defend the Mission Airport and also deny the enemy use of the Civil Aerodrome. The authorities

Commission during World War II 1939-1945, A.H. Tucker, Government Printer, Brisbane, 1949, pp. 25-25.

⁹⁸⁴ Sinclair, Cooktown At War, p. 18.

⁹⁸⁵ Department of Air, A705 171/93/743, Australian Archives.

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid. 37B.

⁹⁸⁷ Memo from A. Hepburn, Director, for Director-General, Civil Aviation, Melbourne to Secretary, Department of Air, Melbourne, 20 October 1948, J56/11 QL687, pt. 2, Australian Archives.

⁹⁸⁸ Sinclair, Cooktown At War, p. 70.

were obviously expecting an enemy attack, as a mobile force was also available to deal with any possible paratroop drop.⁹⁸⁹

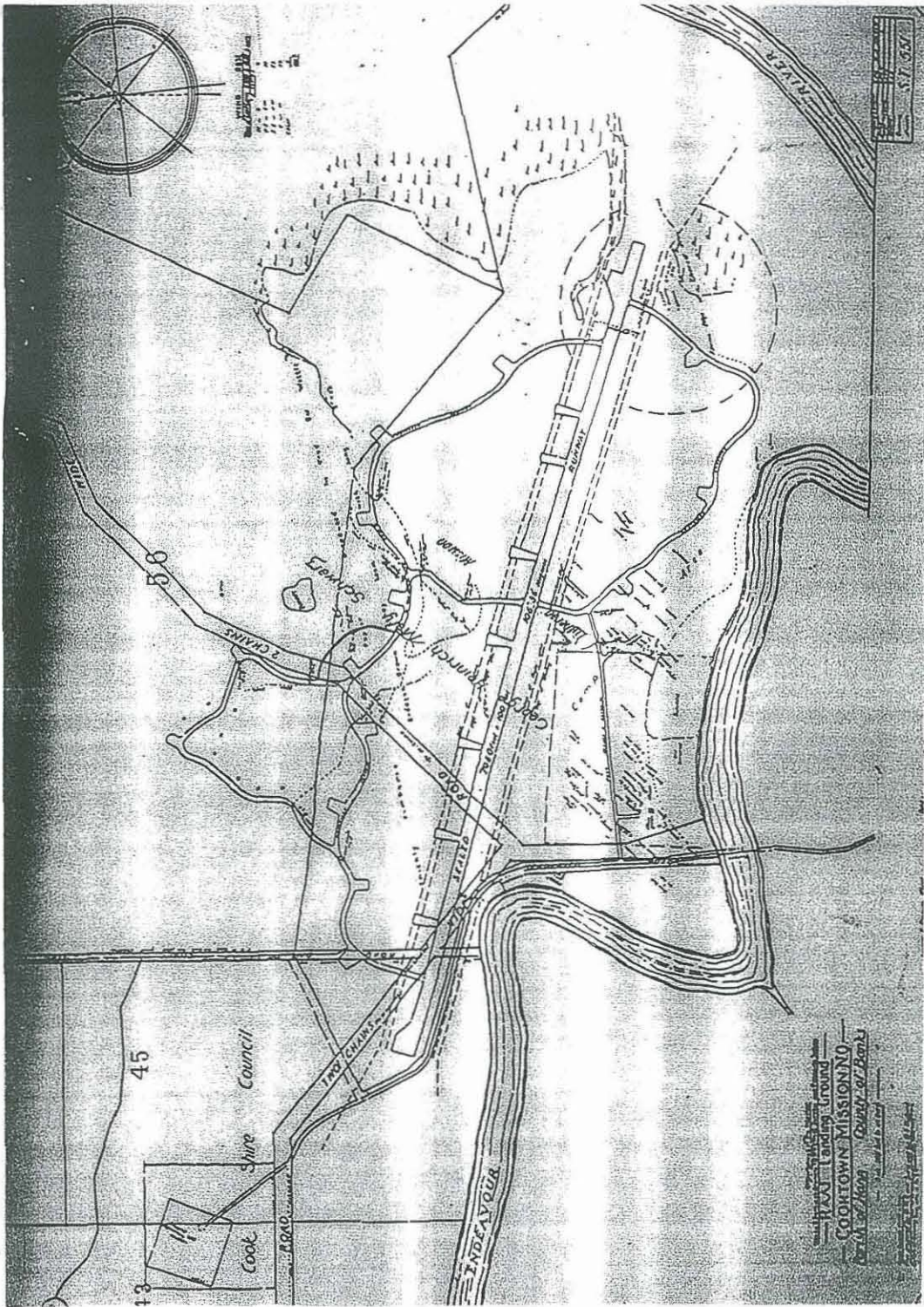
The Mission Aerodrome, being a defence establishment built in the urgency of a wartime situation, lacked urban facilities. Its distance from Cooktown prevented the personnel working there from having easy access to the few facilities the town offered. Consequently, the air force asked for £850 to provide office and storage space, and a refreshment bar for airmen and transients using the drome.⁹⁹⁰ The Department of Air recommended that the request be refused, as Cooktown was not a regular stopping point for air transport, and transient crew were not a significant factor to be considered. The Department thought that no extra funds should be spent as Cooktown was a "backwater" and had been one for a long time. The official view was that the town would become even less important in the future.⁹⁹¹

A range of engineering expertise, including American service engineers, was involved in planning and constructing the Mission Aerodrome. Despite this, extensive repairs were necessary less than two years after construction was completed. By March 1944 much of

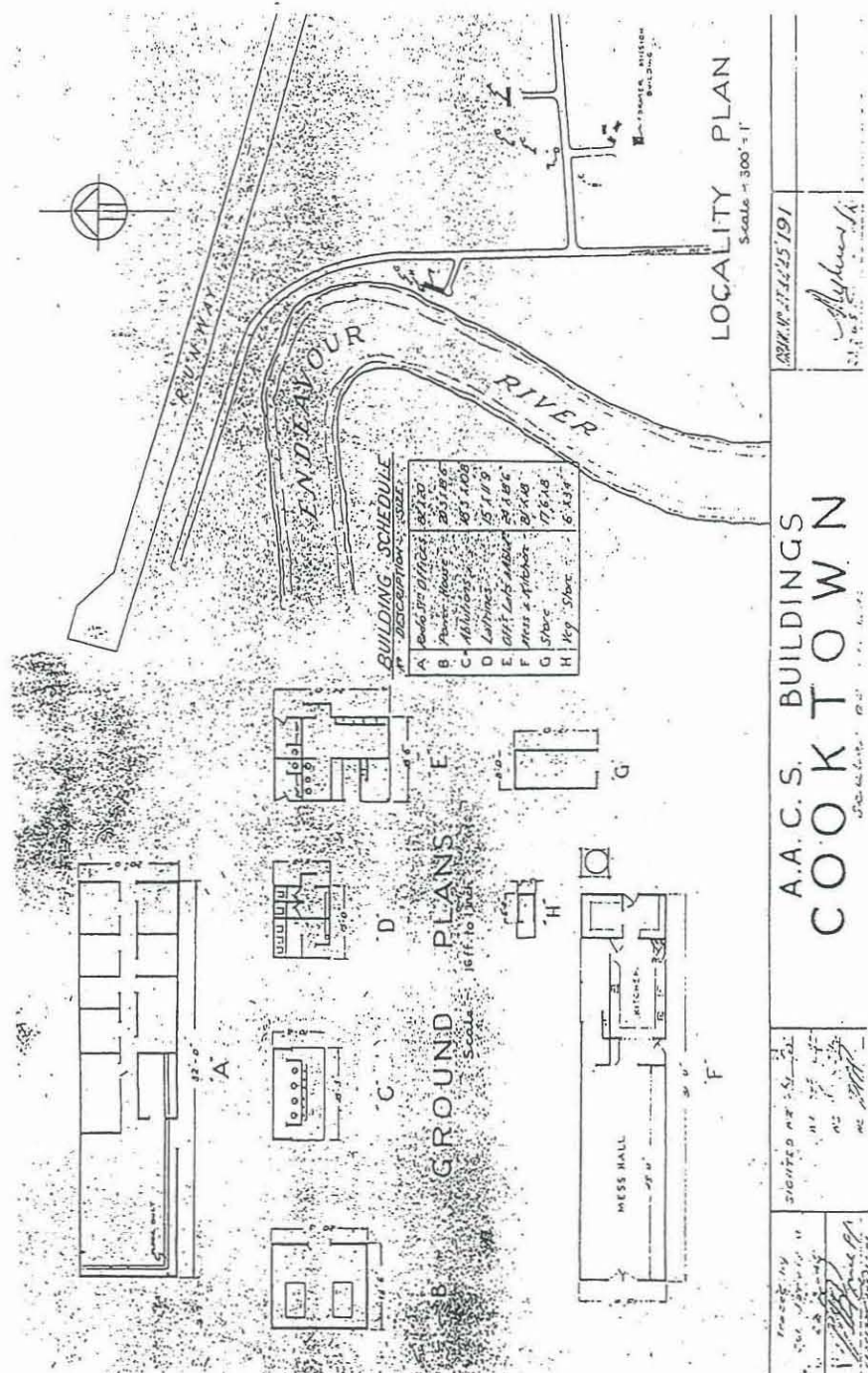
⁹⁸⁹ Australian Infantry Battalion - Operational Instruction No. 1. Defence of Cooktown And Iron Range Airfield - 1943, 9 October 1943, A.W.M. 54, Item No. 243/6/102, Australian War Memorial.

⁹⁹⁰ Memorandum from B.A. Brogan, Wing Commander, Commanding No. 3 Divisional Works Office Re Group 887, R.A.A.F., Townsville to Director of Works and Buildings, R.A.A.F. Headquarters, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, 22 May 1944, A705 7/1 1020, pt. 1. 107B, Australian Archives.

⁹⁹¹ Minute Paper, Department of Air, 19 June 1944, A705 7/1 1020, pt. 1. 107A, Australian Archives.



Plan of Mission Aerodrome, c. 1942. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).



Plan of buildings , Mission Aerodrome, c. 1944. (Sinclair, Cooktown At War).



Aerial view of Mission Aerodrome showing dispersal areas, c. 1944.

(Sinclair, Cooktown At War).

the landing strip and taxiway were unusable, and an investigation revealed that the problem was due to insufficient drainage and faulty construction.⁹⁹² Eventually £51,600 was allocated for the completion of "certain works" to bring the drome up to standard.⁹⁹³ It is obvious that at the very least there was significant incompetence by the engineers responsible for planning and construction, but there is no record that anyone was called to account for the faulty work. It is interesting that the authorities would provide considerable sums of money to rectify the mistakes of highly qualified engineers, but refused to provide a comparatively trifling amount to cater for the comfort of travelling aircrew.

While the Government was faced with considerable expense in repairs to the Mission Aerodrome, the Civil Aviation Department had its own problems with the Civil Aerodrome. Severe storm damage rendered the civilian strip unusable in March 1945, and the levee banks protecting the landing ground collapsed in numerous places, flooding half the aerodrome.⁹⁹⁴ Repairs were expected to cost at least £600, and to take some time, so civil aircraft were allowed to use the Mission Strip until the work was completed.⁹⁹⁵

⁹⁹² Minute Sheet 45, Ref 7/1/1483, 20 October 1944, A705 7/1/1483, Australian Archives.

⁹⁹³ Memorandum from Works Director (Air Services), to Deputy Director General of Allied Works, Department of Works and Housing, Brisbane, 19 November 1945, A705 7/1/1483, Australian Archives.

⁹⁹⁴ Telegram from Lightbody to AVIAT, Melbourne, 13 March 1945, B595/120 65/97/16, pt. 5, Australian Archives.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1945.

Despite the wartime disruption to civilian life in Cooktown, the Council continued to agitate for better air services. In November 1944, the Shire Clerk complained to the Postmaster General that the mail service to Cooktown was not acceptable. He said that as the only air mail service to Cooktown arrived on Thursday morning, at approximately the same time as the weekly launch service, Cooktown derived no benefit from having two services. He suggested that the two services should be staggered to arrive at more appropriate intervals.⁹⁹⁶ A complaint was also lodged with the air mail contractors, Australian National Airways. By the time it was received the airline had commenced an additional flight to Cooktown, giving the town three services each week, as the Thursday flight, which continued to Horn Island, would call at Cooktown on the return trip each Friday. The company also promised to carry mail on any special flights.⁹⁹⁷ However, it said that the people of Cooktown must support the venture, as its continuation was dependent on the run being viable.⁹⁹⁸

Post war changes.

⁹⁹⁶ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Postmaster General, Postmaster's (sic) General Department, Brisbane, 9 November 1944. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁹⁷ The planes left Cairns on Monday at 7 a.m., and on Thursday at 7 a.m. and 10.30 a.m. J.C. Stewart, for Deputy Director, Posts and Telegraphs, Postmaster-General's Department, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 4 December 1944. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁹⁹⁸ H. Trenchard Smith, Manager, Australian National Airways, Pty. Ltd., to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 13 November 1944. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Following the end of the war, the 27 Operational Base Squadron Unit at Cooktown became redundant, and ceased operations in April 1946.⁹⁹⁹ The control of the Mission Aerodrome was transferred to the Department of Civil Aviation in December of that year, including all fixed assets.¹⁰⁰⁰ Many of the ancillary buildings, which were not needed for civilian use, were sold for removal. These included the control tower and weather station, as well as operations buildings and sheds.¹⁰⁰¹ Property retained at the aerodrome included a passenger lounge, senior groundsman's store, fuel store and another small hut.¹⁰⁰²

Civilian aircraft continued to use the Civil aerodrome, which was closer to town, and the Mission Strip, like many small dromes transferred to the Civil Aviation after the war, was placed on a "retained but not maintained" basis. However, in 1949 a cyclone damaged the protective bund wall at the Civilian strip. The resulting inundation caused major damage, and prevented aircraft using the landing ground. The cost of repairing the aerodrome, and the increasing size of aircraft using the strip, prompted the Department of Civil Aviation to abandon this aerodrome in favour of the Mission Strip. After the aerodrome was transferred to Civil Aviation, it remained under the control of the

⁹⁹⁹ Sinclair, *Cooktown At War*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁰⁰ The price paid was £954. Memorandum, A705 171/93/743. 89A. File No. 300/1/Towns 267 R.A.A.F. Handing Over - Taking Over Certificate - Cooktown Mission Aerodrome, J56/11 QL687, pt. 2, Australian Archives.

¹⁰⁰¹ Sales Advice Memo Nos. 142, 173, 195, Property & Survey Branch, Department of Interior, Queensland Branch, 5 November to 11 May 1954, J56/11 QL687, pt. 3, Australian Archives.

¹⁰⁰² T.B. Payne, Chief Property Officer, to Officer-In-Charge Land & Property, 7 October 1954, J56/11 QL687, pt. 3, Australian Archives.

Commonwealth until it was acquired by the Cook Shire Council in 1992.¹⁰⁰³

Tourism.

The availability of the Mission Strip also enabled tourism to develop after the war. A study for the Queensland Government in 1947 reported that "At present the only real tourist transport service to the town is the A.N.A. "Dragon Rapide" service, which operates on three days per week". The report stated that Cooktown had "two good aerodromes constructed for defence purposes, which are capable of accommodating large Douglas aircraft".¹⁰⁰⁴ Tourism is now a staple of Cooktown's economy, and air transport still plays an important part in delivering people to the town.

Conclusion.

It is obvious that the people of Cooktown realised the potential of air transport to assist in halting the decline of their town. They certainly appreciated the strategic importance of Cooktown more than many of the politicians whose responsibility it was to safeguard the country's security. The Shire Council continually applied pressure in the political arena to have an aerodrome built for commercial and strategic purposes. It also demonstrated that it was willing to be generous

¹⁰⁰³ Sinclair, Cooktown At War, p. 137.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Report of The Queensland Tourist Development Board to The Honourable The Premier, Government Printer, Brisbane, 1947, pp. 37-40.

towards that end by allocating land to both the Racecourse site and the Civil Aerodrome site.

It is highly probable that Cooktown would not have the well-constructed aerodrome it now has without the threat of invasion. The vulnerability of the Civil drome to high tides and bad weather was illustrated in the 1945 storm, and again in the 1949 cyclone, and it is doubtful that any Government would have provided the funds necessary to make the aerodrome flood proof if it were not faced with the wartime emergency.

The construction of aerodrome facilities at Cooktown has been instrumental in reversing the town's decline. It enabled the residents of the area to access a more efficient mail service, and a fast transport connection to the outside world. The introduction of air transport did not immediately generate the increase in commercial activity that many people expected. However, this did not mean they were mistaken. The first aerodrome was opened during the depression years, and this stifled growth in economic activity. Fuel rationing was introduced during the Second World War, restricting commercial activity until fuel became readily available in the late 1940s.

The provision of fast passenger and mail services was of undoubted benefit to the population of Cooktown, but of greater importance was the ready access to medical help afforded by air transport. The medical potential of aviation became apparent even before the first aerodrome was built, when Tom McDonald had made his aeroplanes available to transport patients to Cairns. This has had a significant psychological

effect. While Cooktown is not a great physical distance from Cairns, the boat that provided transport between the two centres took almost a full day to cover the distance. Compared with this, the hour taken by the first aeroplanes to fly between the two towns would have seemed miraculous. Air transport helped remove the fear of the "tyranny of distance" that deterred people from living in isolated towns in Australia. The improved access induced people who would not otherwise have lived in such a remote area to reside in small towns like Cooktown. It has also provided elderly residents with the alternative to stay in the town, rather than retire in larger towns away from their families and friends.

By making Cooktown more accessible to the outside world, air transport gave tourists without the time or proper vehicles to travel long distances over appalling roads a chance to visit the historic town. However, the most important benefit to the Cooktown area was the "mantle of safety" offered by the Aerial Ambulance and the Flying Doctor.¹⁰⁰⁵ This innovation has been crucial in the fight to halt the decline of the Cooktown area. It has encouraged many people to settle in an area with limited permanent health facilities, secure in the knowledge that expert medical help is available.

¹⁰⁰⁵ For instance Lennie Wallace describes how when her baby was due she was taken to Cairns by the Aerial Ambulance, despite allowing sufficient time to make the trip by road. This option was not available when the roads became impassable due to wet weather. Lennie Wallace, 1997. Bitten By The Bull Bug, Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, pp. 9-13.