

RAAF Base Mawson

Antarctic Flight

Role: Expeditions and Rescue



They were simply called Antarctic Flight. Not No. 1 Antarctic Flight or 1 AF as is traditional with the naming of Air Force units. The Air Force use No's and acronyms for most of their units but 1 AF is an acronym for something else on the RAAF acronym list.

The base opened at the same time as Mawson Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition or ANARE station commenced. Two Auster aircraft, A11-200 and A11-201 were taken to Mawson on the Kista Dan, They were used as support aircraft to guide the Kista Dan into and out of Horse Shoe Harbour, or Horse Shoe Bay as it was called then. The aircraft also did inland and coastal surveying, mapping, photography and scientific flights in support of the ANARE expedition.

On the 13th of February 1954, Phillip Law proclaimed Mawson for Australia. Claiming territory depended on certain formalities, including building a rock cairn, raising a flag and reading a proclamation. It was significant our military were present for this ceremony, even though they were not performing a military function.



Proclamation Ceremony - Phillip Law proclaims Mawson for Australia

The Air Force also held an opening ceremony for the RAAF Base.



L to R

Sgt. Frank Morgan (airframe fitter), Sgt. Ken W Duffell (Engines), Flt Lt Doug W Leckie (Commanding Officer) and Flt Sgt. R Seaver 2nd Pilot

Taken from ANARE negative no 3228

Leckie was the Officer in charge of the Flight.

The aircraft were only used for the summer operation and returned with the Kista Dan to Australia. During the return journey, A11-200 was lost over the side of a ship.

Two summers later, two aircraft were taken south again. The one surviving Auster (A11-201) and a Beaver aircraft (A95-201). Squadron Leader Doug W Leckie was again to lead this Flight along with Fly Off. John Seaton (2nd pilot to Leckie), Sgt. Gerry Sundberg (engines) and Sgt. Geoff Johansen (airframes). The Mawson changeover was completed on the 4th of March 1956 and the Flight then began constructing Mawson's hanger. This was completed before winter and gave them the ability to complete winter flying operations. This was the start of the permanent presence of RAAF Base Mawson. Flying commenced on 5 January 1956 and a total of 548 hours were flown in 301 sorties. (*Alfresco Flight.*) The airmen did not sleep in the hanger, they slept in the ANARE village and worked in the hanger.



The Original Hanger. Note upright boxing kangaroo on the Beaver

The original hanger was not as long as the fully completed and current hanger. This hanger was about 10 metres shorter. The hanger underwent two extensions. First it was lengthened, then the side rooms were added.



RAAF Base Mawson after the hanger extensions. Timber sign is now a shelving board along the north wall

The hanger is located down on the waters edge on the end of East Arm of Horseshoe Harbour and the light aircraft used the sea ice for take off and landing.



Doug Leckie at the Beaver controls wearing his felt flying jacket

A range of RAAF aircraft, including a DC3 Dakota, was also based year round at Mawson from 1956-60. The planes were used extensively and successfully to survey over a million square kilometres of Australian Antarctic Territory, including the vast and remote Prince Charles Mountains.

These years were not without mishap. Blizzards destroyed a range of aircraft stationed on the plateau inland from Mawson. Casualties included two DeHavilland Beavers in late December 1959 at Gwamm airfield. The flight had no other aircraft. Gwamm is a flat plateau type area approximately 150 metres above Mawson and 1 kilometre inland. Gwamm has been used continuously since Mawson began until the present time for aircraft movement.

In this blizzard, the Beaver snapped its three ton tie wires and the wing tip fastener had broken loose. Pilot Sandercock climbed into the aircraft, started the engine and flew it stationary into the wind for 2 hours getting airborne from time to time. The bliz tore the heavy railway sleepers to which A95-203 was anchored out of the ice. These deadmen were buried to a depth of two feet. Eventually a D4 dropped its dozer blade onto one of the anchors relieving the pilot. But it was all in vain. Overnight the winds blew up to 190 klms/hr and ripped a wing off the beaver and it was wiped out. Before its demise, its propeller was observed slowly revolved against the engine compression and the aircraft dragged the six ton bull dozer to which it was anchored over the ice.

The biggest year for Antarctic Flight was 1960 when 12 airmen were posted to Mawson.



L to R:

Sgt Kevin Felton, LAC B Rutter, Cpl J Arthur, Sqn Ldr JC Kitchenside, Flt Lt E Bloomfield, F/O G Dyke, Cpl H Harris, Flt Sgt H Carne, Sgt R Murphy, Sgt D Monks, P/O K Assender, F/O N Hanson.

An RAAF Douglas Dakota was delivered to Mawson on board the Thala Dan in January 1960, to be used in conjunction with a DeHavilland Beaver. Unlike the Beaver, the Dakota was suitable for aerial photography. These two aircraft were the only two aircraft the flight had for the 1960 year. They were to replace both Beavers lost in the previous year.



Dakota DC3 being offloaded at Mawson

Shortly after being re-assembled, the Dakota was damaged in a handling mishap, and effectively out of action until 7 August. After a disappointing start, both aircraft were

repositioned at Rumdoodle near Mawson, in readiness for operations the following summer. Unfortunately, a blizzard which raged from 8-11 December completely destroyed both aircraft. The winds reached 100 knots. The DC3 was tied down with 15 ton breaking strain steel wire and that snapped. It was found days later 8 miles west of Mawson, 400' above sea level in a heavily crevassed ice cliff. Rumdoodle is 11 miles south of Mawson but the coastline west goes south west. So it was blown approximately 10 miles or 16 kilometres from it's tie down point.



Radio room 1960. L-R. Bloomfield, Kitchenside Harris & Carne



Radio room 2017. Note original bookshelves & bench

These losses signaled the end of the year-round operations of the RAAF Antarctic Flight. They had lost all their aircraft for both 1959 and 1960. Sqn Ldr Batchelor had an air and ground crew of 9 ready, trained and posted to Mawson for the 1961 year to replace Sqn Ldr Kitchenside's crew. These were due for departure within weeks. No replacement aircraft had been ordered. Everything happened at the last minute. Without aircraft, Batchelor's crew postings were cancelled. Kitchenside's crew returned to Melbourne in early 1961. His was the last crew to be stationed at RAAF Base Mawson.

As Kitchenside was leaving, the Air Force decided they would not winter again at Mawson hence 1960 was the last year for RAAF Base Mawson. Whether Kitchenside got this news the day he left is uncertain but he would have had no time to RTA all their gear.

Henceforth, Antarctic Flight would only fly during the summer season, and operate on floats from a ship. There was no Antarctic Flight during the 1961 year. They returned to the Antarctic in both 1962 and 1963 going down and coming back with the ship but they didn't visit Mawson.

After its 1962-63 expedition, the RAAF Antarctic Flight was disbanded and owing to commitments in Malaya and later Vietnam the RAAF's role in close aircraft support for ANARE operations ceased.

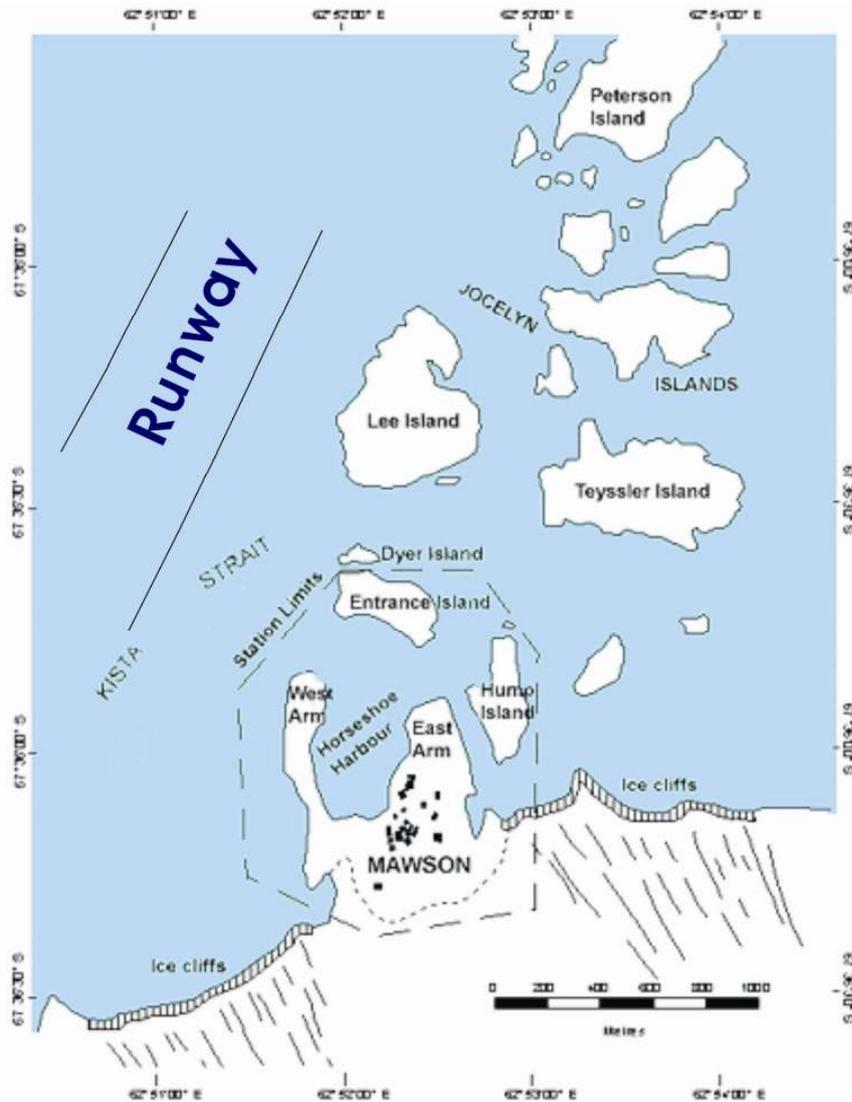
Antarctic Flight performed approximately 750 sorties and 2,000 flying hours out of RAAF Base Mawson. Every sortie listed in David Wilson's *Alfresco Flight* has been added up but he has not listed every single sortie with the exception of 1957. A number of other sources were used for sorties and flying hours.

Antarctic Flight			
RAAF Base Mawson, Antarctic			
Antarctic Flight			
Record of Sorties			
	Number	Hours	
1954	41		
1956	301	600	175 hrs photography. 50,000 nautical miles travelled. Carried 152 passengers and 25,250 pounds of cargo.
1957	213	300+	Doug Johnston, the 2nd pilot, flew 300+ hours himself. No details found on first pilot Peter Clemence.
1958	35 min	1000+	ANARE Field Work 1958 P Law Polar Record Vol 9 No 60
1959	85 min		From 1954 to 1959 Antarctic Flight had logged over 1,500 flying hours - Air Clues Oct 1959
1960	75		
1961	0		
1962	24	79 hr 15 min	7,000 miles flown of which 1,800 miles were photographic surveys.
1963	14		Antarctic Flight did not visit Mawson during 1962 and 1963
	747 min	2,000 hours min	

Commercial fixed wing aircraft were chartered for support work until 1974. A turbine powered Beaver aircraft was used until 1968-69, when it was replaced with the more adaptable Pilatus Porter until 1975-81. One of the last of the Porters met the same fate as its predecessors in a blizzard at Gwamm in January 1975.

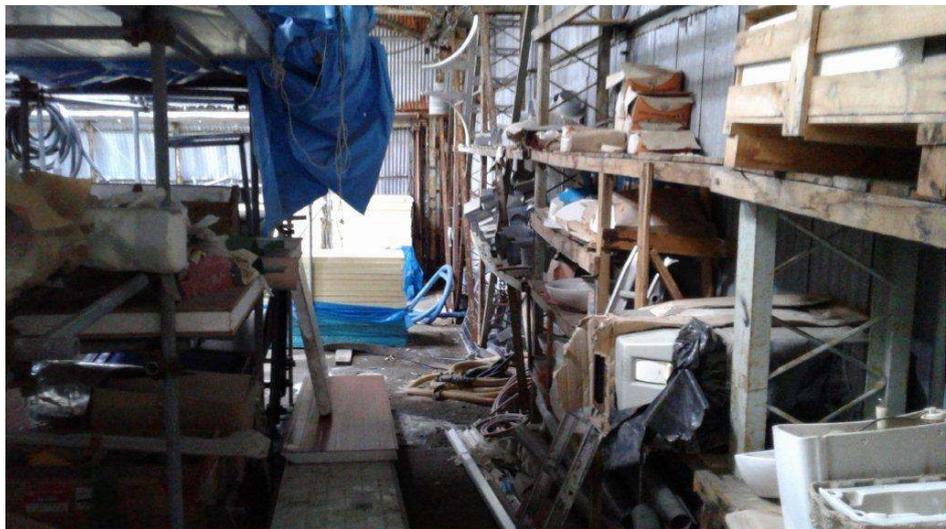
AWM have a video, in colour, of the Beaver aircraft flying around Mawson and parked outside the hanger. See <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/F10462/>. It appears from the video that the Air Force used Kista Strait as their runway, taking off and landing on the sea ice.





After Antarctic Flight abandoned Mawson in 1961, the hanger was left abandoned. ANARE did not use it and still to this day have not used the hanger facilities.

Successive ANARE wintering parties appeared to treat the former base and hanger as still belonging to the RAAF and appear to respect it as such. When I wintered at Mawson in 1974, I visited the hanger.



North wall shelving and location of all signage



RAAF Mawson Hanger on the end of East Arm Circa 1983. Photo by Dave McCormack

The Air Force moved out 13 years prior and it was as if they had just recently left. The hanger door was inoperable and partially open and the hanger had a fair amount of drift snow inside. In fact the back of the hanger was just solid ice. The offices and rooms were thoroughly deserted. But there was still a large number of wooden boxes on the hanger floor. They were stamped 'RAAF Antarctica, DAK'. I rummaged through some boxes. I had to dig them out of the snow and pull the nailed on boards off to open the boxes. I found flying uniforms. They were made from felt and the jacket had a fur lined hood. There were matching trousers. I took one of the jackets with me and kept it. I have to say, I did feel guilty. I was looking over my shoulder as if to expect an Air Force officer to barge in and scream at me saying *what are you doing laddie?* There were a lot of these boxes lying around in exactly the same spot when the Air Force abandoned them 13 years earlier.

I obviously didn't rummage well enough. One of my colleagues, Graham Duncan Dadswell, one of our wireless operators, found a woolen lined leather flying jacket still in mint condition. He took it out and wore it for the rest of the year. He used it on the Knuckey Peaks resupply traverse. He didn't take it with him when he left Mawson. He thought that our station OIC Dave Luders included it with some other items that were RTA'd to RAAF Point Cook for their Antarctic Flight museum. (RTA is Antarctic glish for Return To Australia). Dave Luders has confirmed that this never happened which means the jacket was left on base and has almost certainly found a new home by now.



Brendan in the felt flying jacket



Dadswell in the leather flying jacket

Dave McCormack was one of our diesel mechanics in 1974. Dave wintered several times and later was appointed to the position of Plant Manager for the Antarctic Division, a position he held till his retirement. On one of his winters to Mawson in 1983, He repaired the hanger door. He constructed a big brace on the interior framework of the big door to support it before finally getting it to rise again after it fell down. The door had fallen out of the ceiling and nearly killed the chippy from the 1982 party.

Dave turned it into a great storage area for vehicles and equipment and sealed all the holes and cracks with guzma foam. He also put some more skylights in the roof to let in more natural light. He found these skylights sheets in a box out the back buried in snow and ice. The Air Force installed a couple and obviously had plans to install the rest. This was the first time the hanger had been used by anyone for anything since the RAAF departed in 1961. Unfortunately though in the following years after 1988, Dave's last winter there, some winterers started to use it as a dumping place for all the junk they didn't want and one person ran a big vehicle into the door so now it can't open safely and the door hasn't been opened for many years. ANARE have now decided it should be a heritage building. To this day, Dave McCormack has been the only person to do any work on the hanger since the Air Force departed in 1961. Also as plant manager, Dave has gone south with the summer parties almost every year up until around 2014. When he visits Mawson, he takes people on tours of the RAAF Hanger.

Documents of records of the RAAF sorties and operations carried out by Antarctic Flight were retrieved from the hanger offices. Dave McCormack found one in the Station Commander's office and no one knew it was there. He returned it to the Antarctic Division for archiving. I found another one of these in the Mawson library when I was there in 1974. I perused over some of their sorties.

In hindsight it is now easy to see why the Air Force left everything including flying log books behind. When Kitchenside's crew left, he was expecting a replacement air crew. By the time he actually departed he would have known that his replacement crew's postings had all been cancelled because of the lack of aircraft, but he would still have been thinking that another crew would come the following summer. He didn't pack up for a permanent departure, he

packed up for another crew to come later. The decision to abandon Mawson was made by the Air Board in a meeting on February 10, 1961, 1 day prior to his departure. The earliest he could have received that news was the day he departed. He left everything for the next crew but the next crew never came. The Air Board's decision was based on the cost of the aircraft losses balanced against any gains the Air Force could make. The Air Force didn't obviously care much for what they had left behind, they never arranged for ANARE to return all their belongings, they were simply abandoned.

When we departed in February 1975, the boxes of flying suits were still there. Dave McCormack returned to winter again in 1978 and those boxes, along with the woolen lined leather flying jacket, were no where to be seen. Someone from either of the 1975, 1976 and/or 1977 wintering parties souvenired everything.

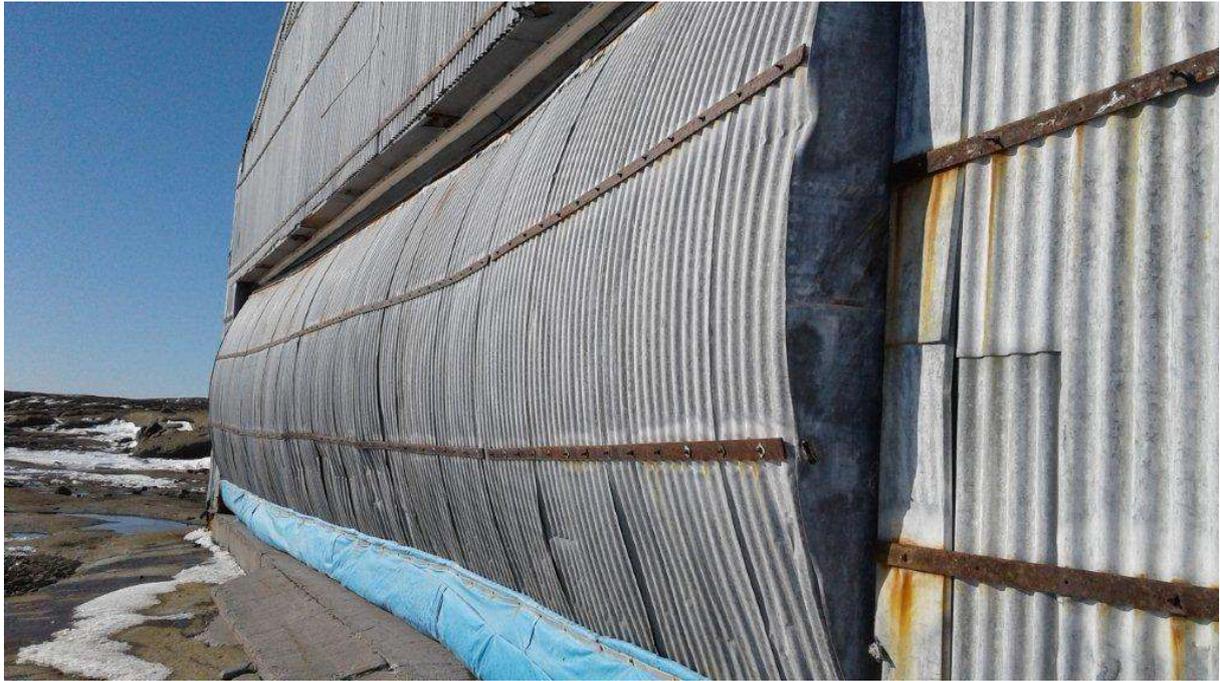
Dave McCormack returned to winter again in 1988. During that year he went on the Autumn traverse out to the Northern Prince Charles Mountains to set up the new summer base (later named Dovers). On that traverse he found the remains of the "250 mile depot", put there by Doug Leckie in 1955/56 to support the 1956 field party led by Bill Bewsher and Syd Kirkby the surveyor. The depot had lots of stuff in it which Dave RTA'd. It contained a heavy woolen jumper and a jacket with Doug Leckie's name tags on them and other bits as well.

These all disappeared from the Antarctic Division store some months after he got back.

The building though was one of the first buildings built at Mawson and it has withstood the test of time including all of the many howling blizzards and 100 knot plus winds. That's 185 kilometres per hour plus, over 200 kilometres per hour winds that strike Mawson many times every year.

The following is a gallery of some general photos of the RAAF's hanger including some internal photos. These have been provided courtesy of Dave McCormack. Dave made a special trip back to Mawson in 2017 just to take these photos for us.





Hanger door



Engineer's Workshop. Inside the workshop below. Front door winch on the rear wall pillar to the left



Front door winch on the rear wall pillar



Signs left behind. DAK-183 was the Dakota aircraft



Hanger floor from the Workshop



Hanger Door from Inside



Block & Tackle used to remove the aircraft engines



Hanger Door mechanism



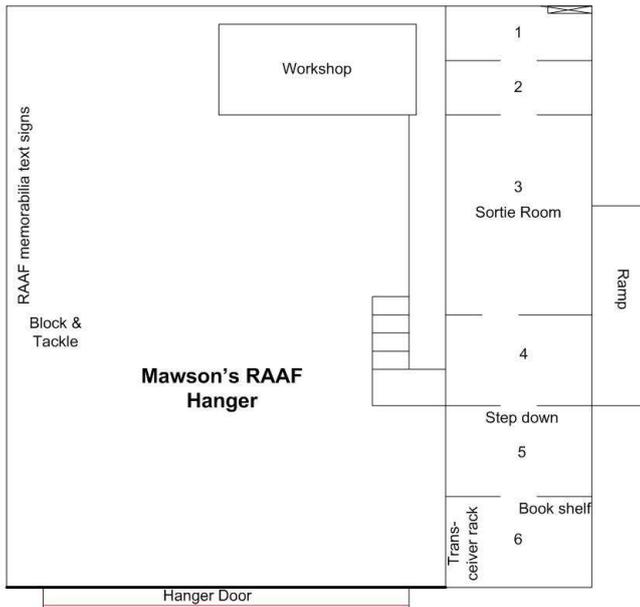
Sorties (Ops) Room



Radio Transceiver Rack SW Corner in Radio Room



Various signage left by the members



Brendan Godwin
 A117468 LAC (Reserve) Retired; Radio Technician Ground
 Bureau of Meteorology Radio Technical Officer and Weather Observer
 Mawson Base 1974
 20th March 2017