

A trip to Pearce.

While in Perth recently for the WRAAF reunion, we were lucky enough to be given a tour of RAAF Pearce. Gary Booth (right), the ADF PR man in the West organised it for us, and for that we thank him and Cpl Nicole O’Hehir, from 25 Sqn, was kind enough to drive us here, there and everywhere and give us the full Cook’s Tour.



Although we had an illustrious 6 year career in the RAAF, we never copped a posting to Pearce so we had no idea what it was like in days gone by. We asked two ex-WRAAFs, who were far better looking and far better company than any blokes we know and who were posted there in the early 1970’s to accompany us and point out the way it used to be. [Ros Curran](#) and Alanna Tabone both arrived at Pearce in 1974, both had fond memories of the place and both were only too happy to make a return visit.

Pearce is (by road) about 45 klms NNE of Perth, in the Swan Valley and near the small township of Bullsbrook and for many years it has been the home of No 2 Flying Training School.

Units based at Pearce today include:

No 2 Flying Training School	No 79 Squadron
453 Squadron (ATC)	No 25 City of Perth Sqn
No 1 Security Force Squadron	No 1 Airfield Engineering detachment
No 1 Expeditionary Health Sqn	Combat Support Unit Pearce
Singapore Air Force No 130 Sqn	

and aircraft based there include the smart little Pilatus [PC-9 trainer](#), (below) the same aircraft as used by the Roulettes and the BAE Hawk, which is operated by both 79 Sqn at Pearce and also 76 Sqn at Willytown.





Since 1993, the Air Force from the Republic of Singapore has also operated out of Pearce with their 19 Pilatus PC-21 training aircraft.

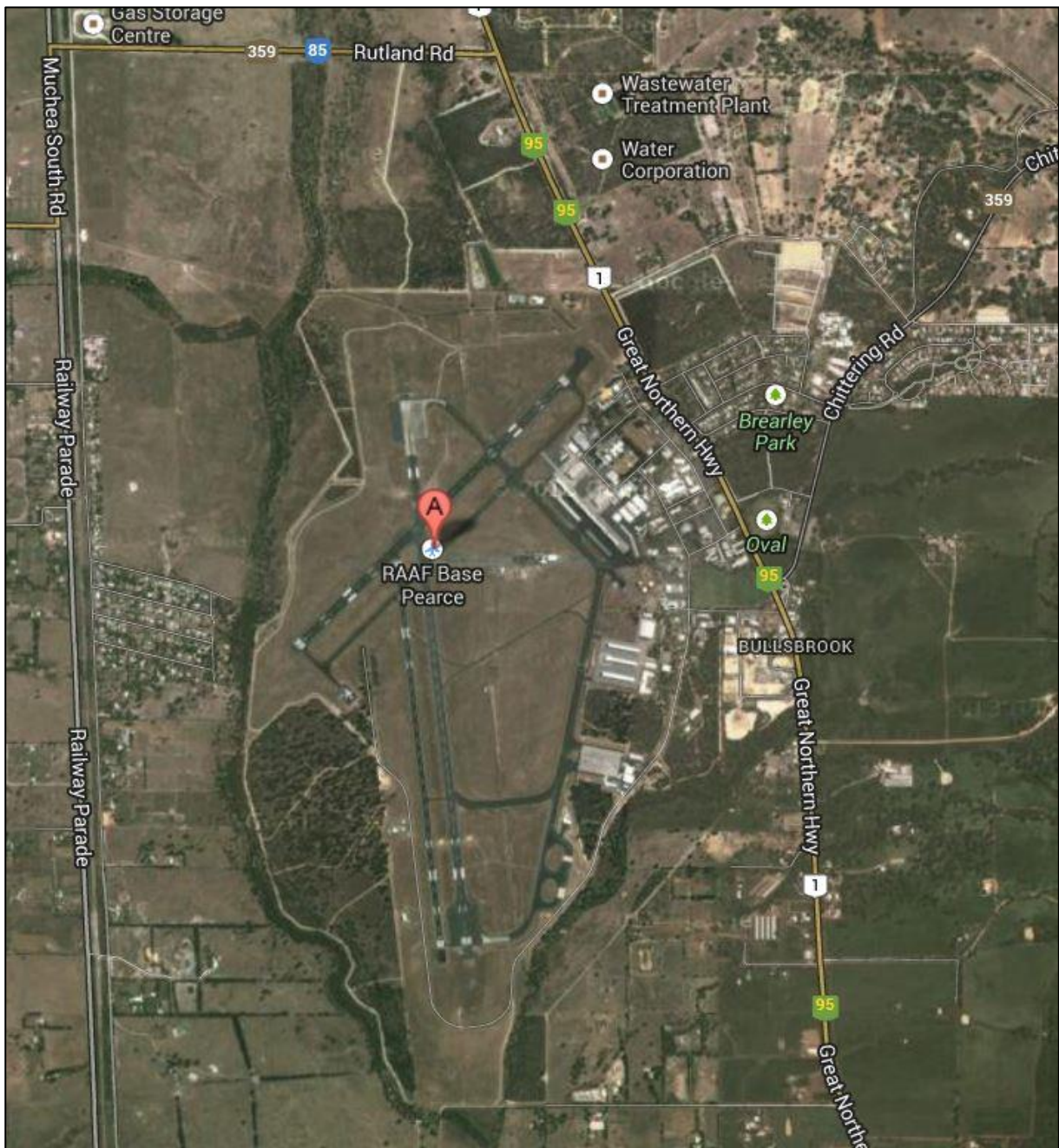


The site for RAAF Pearce was selected back in 1928. Construction began in 1936 and the base has been operational since February 1939 when the WWII No 5 Initial Training School was established under the Empire Air Training Scheme. After the war, Pearce was used as a base for a variety of operations, but was dedicated to training roles in 1958 after the arrival of No 1 Advanced Flying Training School and the Vampire jet trainer.

A proposal to redevelop the Base was made in May 2007. In 2008, the Australian Department of Defence awarded a contract to John Holland to renovate the aged infrastructure and facilities. Stage 1 of the redevelopment began in October 2008 at a cost of A\$154m and included construction and refurbishment of a fuel farm, engineering services, fuel quality centre, noise-attenuated engine run-up facility, training and operational facilities, air movements facility, a combined Mess and live-in accommodation for cadet pilots. Old and redundant facilities were demolished, a defence restricted network was installed, the existing passenger terminal refurbished and air cargo hangar facilities restored.

The base is named in honour of Sir George Pearce, a long-standing Senator from Western Australia. Pearce was elected to the inaugural Senate in 1901 and remained a Senator for Western Australia until 1938. He was Minister for Defence in four separate ministries including the period 1910 to 1913 when the Royal Australian Air Force was formed.

The Minister said “At this church, we welcome all denominations, but we really prefer tens and twenties.”





On the way to the base the girls insisted on popping into the old Red Roof hotel - just for sentimental reasons they assured me. The hotel is right next to the base and I'm told a few coldies were enjoyed there by many some years ago. After we had sampled a few of the local's delights, it was onto the base.



These days the old entrance is no longer used, it has been closed and locked and just sits there as a reminder of what used to be. A new entrance has been built further south west (towards the Red Roof) and while it might be more efficient than the old one, it does not have the same "charm".

It's a pity that buildings, which have history have to be discarded for new efficient but soul-less structures. If only this one could speak, it could tell many a story.



The new entrance to Pearce, like most other Australian bases, is now manned by Civvy contractors – no more guard duty for the naughty boys.



North Avenue, just north of the old guard gate, was the site of many married quarter houses, but since the RAAF has detached itself from these dwellings, sadly they have all fallen into severe dis-repair.

The first site the two girls wanted to see, naturally, was the old WRAAF quarters (below).

Nicole O’Hehir, who is well into her second pregnancy, looks on while the girls rush around everywhere, trying to remember what was what.

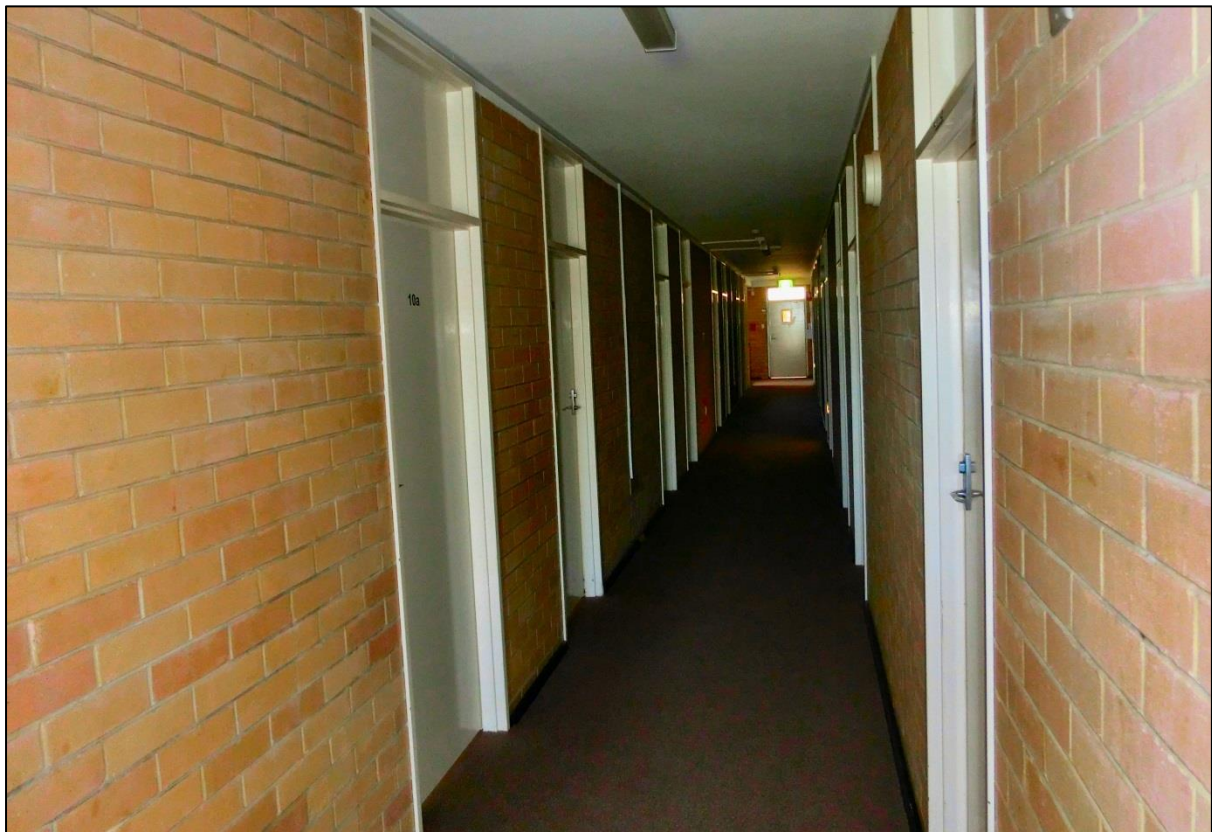


Below, Alana Tabone (left) and Ros Curran in the courtyard of the old WRAAF quarters. They said things haven't changed an awful lot since they left here over 35 years ago, except of course, there were no other girls and as a consequence, no noise!!.



Rumour has it the place is haunted, but if so, the ghost was on leave-in-lieu the day we were there as it was as quiet as a mouse.

Below, the old courtyard, the brick block with the number 263 on it used to be the site of the girls barbecue where, we were told, many a snag was destroyed, many a stubby was consumed, quite a few boys were discussed and many a lie was told.



Inside the WRAAF quarters, this dark little corridor led to the girls single room 'cells'. This is the area that is supposed to be haunted.

As the WRAAFs were not allowed to mix and dine with the airmen, they used the much closer Office Cadet's Mess which was just over the road from the WRAAF quarters. This Mess has long gone and all that remains is the cleared spot below.



After leaving the old WRAAF quarters, we visited the new “joint” Officers, Sergeants, Airmans Messes. Like most ADF bases these days, the Messes are built in such a way that they surround a common kitchen so all meals come from the one prep area. This, of course, is done solely for an economic reason with the result the Messes, although providing far better facilities do not have the same atmosphere and attraction they once did.

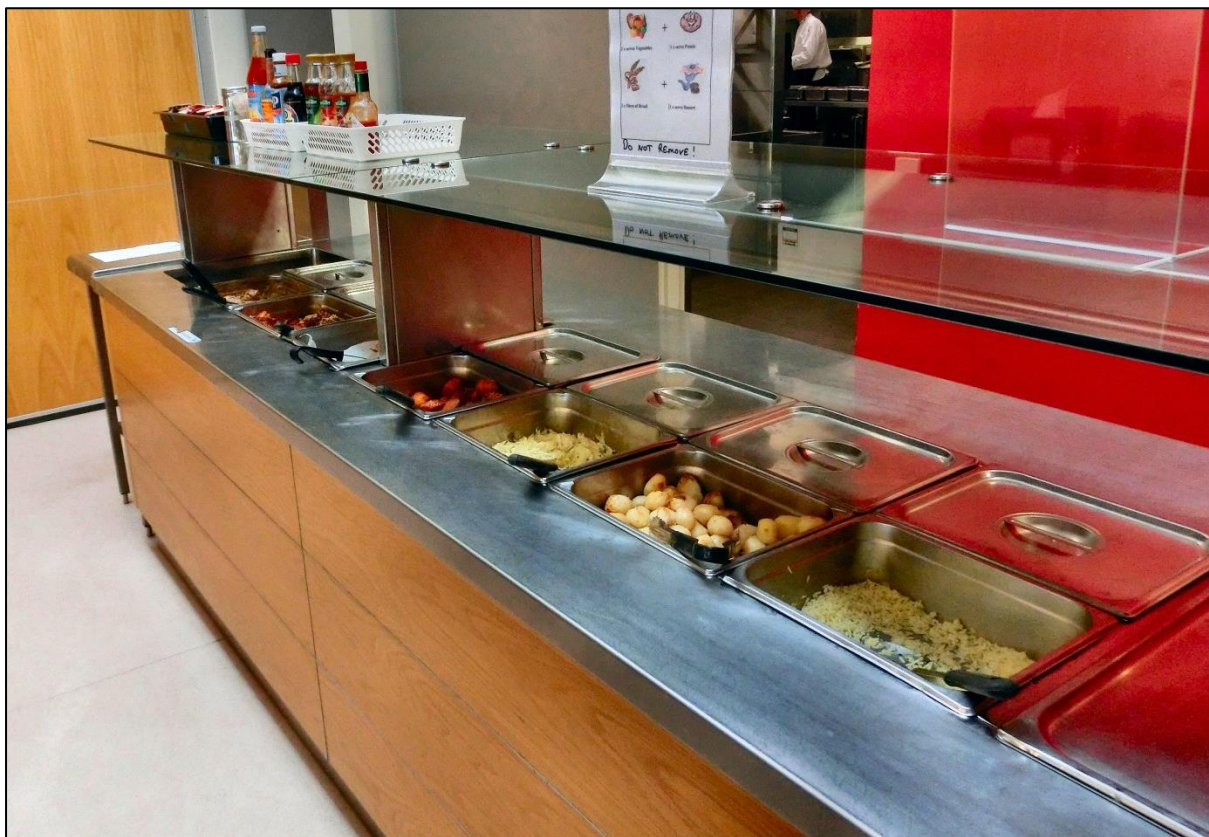


Above – the joint Mess area, looking towards the Airman's Mess section.



This is the new Airman's Mess and like other ADF Messes, these days is run by civvy contractors, Conditions are as good as you would find in a family restaurant anywhere, everything is spotlessly clean, food is healthy and of good quality and is attractively presented in a self-service bain-marie, but those of us who experienced the days when the kitchens were run by the "we're here to feed you, not fatten you" RAAF cooks, it just isn't the same.

The small number of people who use these wonderful facilities seem to confirm our feelings.





This is the new Airman's Boozer. Unlike days ago, the 'boozer' fronts onto the Airman's Mess and is divided from the Mess by a single wall – it is not a separate building as used to be the case. Once again, conditions are excellent, comfortable chairs, carpeted floor, pool table, professional décor – but hardly used.

It's a shame really.



The "beer garden" in front of the Airman's 'Boozer' with the Sergeants Mess in the back-ground. Mixing the ranks socially doesn't seem a problem these days.

If you don't read the newspaper you are uninformed,
if you do read the newspaper you are misinformed.

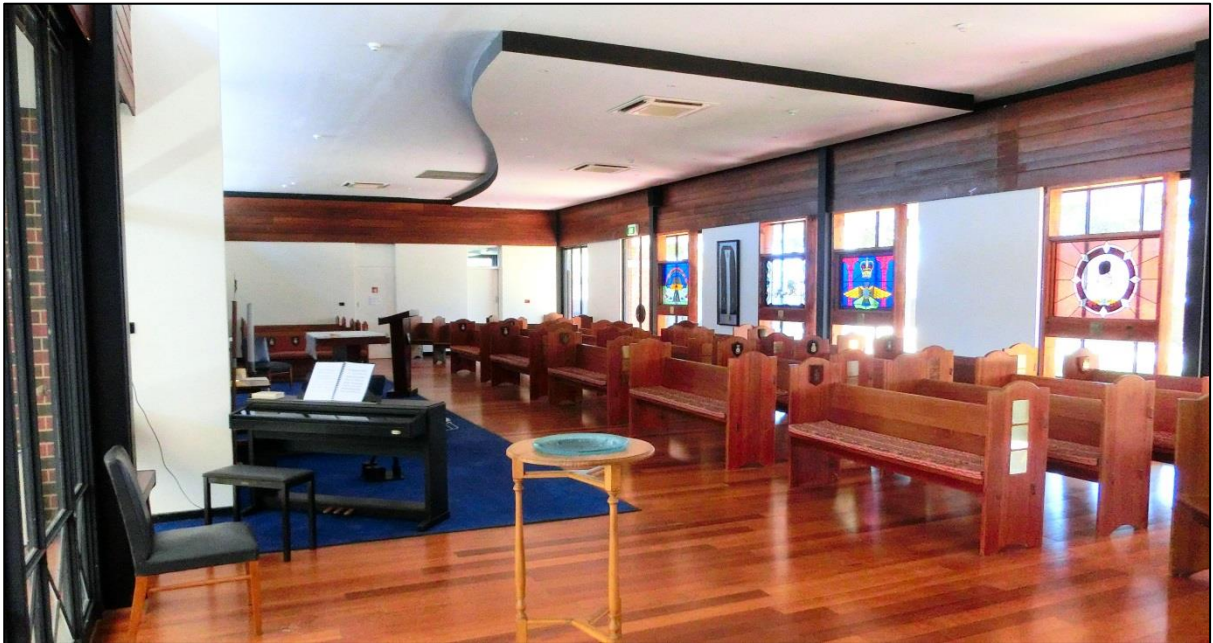


Blokes who were at Pearce years ago would have eaten in the Airman's Mess that used to sit on this site. This is about 50 metres from the new Mess which is to the left of this pic. The old building has been completely demolished.



But while the old Airman's Mess might have been demolished, the old Airman's Boozer still stands and these days has a new lease on life. This is the old "beer garden" and the long-gone boozer was behind the windows in the middle of the pic.

This building is now used in a way that could not be further from its original usage. Today it is the base chapel and the atmosphere inside the building is a lot more peaceful than it used to be.

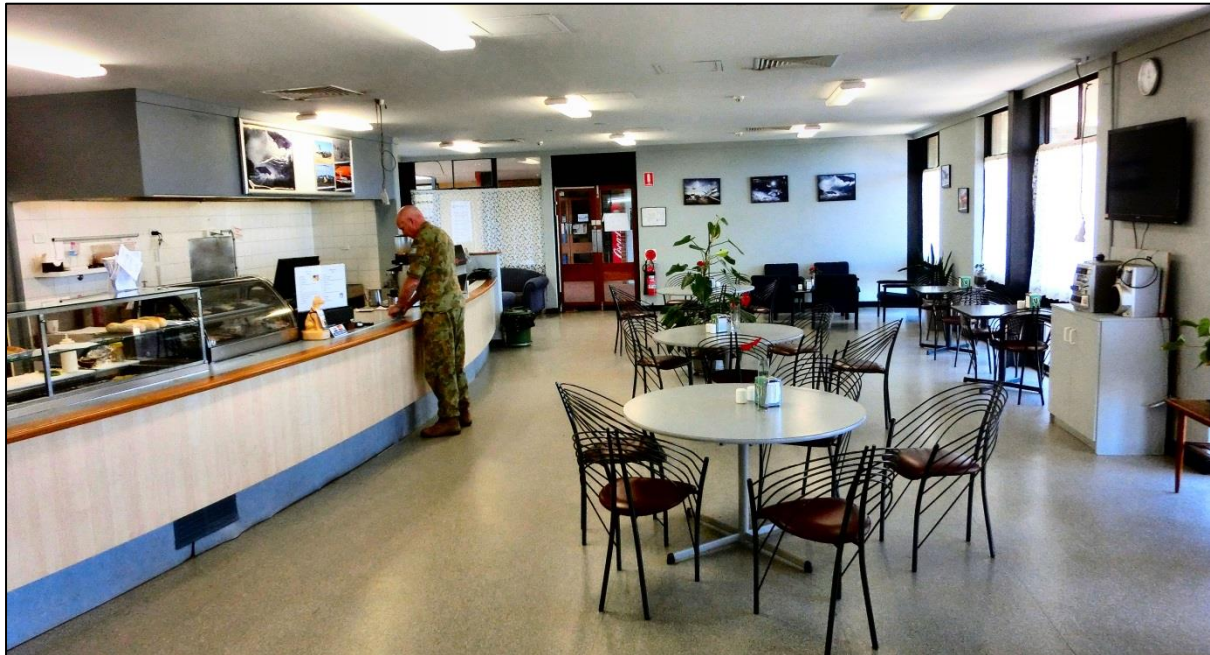


Below, Alanna Tabone (left) and Ros Curran. Both girls reckon if the old Boozer could be opened again, more people would use it than the new facility – they reckoned this one had a larrikin atmosphere.



I almost had a psychic girlfriend, But she left me before we met.

Below, the old ASCO building, now called Frontline.



The old WRAAF quarters can be seen in the distance (below). This photo was taken from the entrance to Frontline (old ASCO) and the girls say 30 plus years ago, at about 10.00pm, many a WRAAF could be seen heading along the cement path, stepping over all the 44's that were in the way.



If everything seems to be going well, you have obviously overlooked something.

Not far from the Frontline shop is the RAAF Cadets building.



In 1941, during the Second World War, the Australian War Cabinet approved the formation of a cadet corps as part of the RAAF Reserve – it was called the ‘Air Training Corps’ (ATC). Group Captain W.A. Robertson was appointed Director and 6 Wings were established, one per State and although staffed by a small nucleus of RAAF personnel, most of the ATC’s instructors were unpaid volunteers, many of whom had been pilots in WWI.

By 1943, 12,000 cadets were under training and although this number declined to 7,557 when the Pacific War ended in 1945, by then just under 12,000 former members had gone on to enlist in the wartime RAAF.

The Corps had two objectives, the primary and short-term aim was to train and educate young men aged between 16 and 18 to join the wartime RAAF. The second, long-term objective, which came into force after the 1939-45 War, was

- to encourage young men to increase their knowledge of air matters and in particular the RAAF,
- instil a sense of discipline and,
- provide elementary training in air-related technical matters;

thus, even at that stage, a continuing post-war role was seen for the Corps.

From 1946 to 1948 the Cadet numbers were scaled down for post war years and the primary aim was changed to a peacetime role:

- Squadrons were reduced to Flights.
- The Corps became an ‘air youth movement’, and
- Its numbers were reduced to ‘at least 3,000’.

Cadets were under no obligation to enlist in the RAAF, but preference would be extended to them should they desire to do so.



In 1975 the Whitlam Labor Government disbanded the ATC as well as the Army and Navy Cadets but when Labor was defeated in 1976, the Fraser Coalition Government reformed the Australian Cadets movement and in 1982 girls were admitted.

In 2001, the Air Training Corps was renamed the 'Australian Air Force Cadets' (AAFC) and in 2005 the AAFC was reorganised into operational and functional wings:

- Ground Training,
- Air Training and
- Logistics Support.

Today the AAFC is a very active body with Squadrons in most centres. A large number of cadets go on to join the Permanent Air Force and if you have a child or grandchild who would enjoy being part of an interesting and exciting organisation, look [HERE](#) for a squadron near you.



Above, an old 4 to a room Airman's block, there are not many of these left on the base, they have been replaced by the single unit blocks below.





One facility on the base that is still there is the 'despised-by-most' Parade Ground, though it seems to be not as prominent and not as important as it used to be. Today it is a gravel surfaced area and the girls seem to remember years ago it was sealed.



The Macchi is still there, the girls think it has been moved from where it was originally displayed and these days it is next to the parade ground.

What happens if you get scared half to death twice?



The Base Cinema is still there and still operates, but to smaller and smaller audiences. However, like at Edinburgh, it was built years ago and was set up to show reel film, not digital media and with movies on film becoming harder and harder to get, its days are probably numbered. The cost to update the Cinema to digital format is thought to be prohibitive and with solid state TVs getting bigger and bigger and also cheaper and cheaper, you wouldn't bet on it lasting too long.



The Old Officer's Mess building is also still there, though we didn't discover what it is used for these days.

If at first you don't succeed, destroy all evidence that you tried.

We sat down with Nicole after the tour and Ros and Alanna were telling her what the conditions were like in their day. Both girls expressed their thoughts that the RAAF was a better organisation years ago and were quite surprised when Nicole didn't agree with them and was quite adamant that the RAAF was now a fabulous

organisation and she would not hesitate to advise her young son to join if and when he chose to do so.

We suppose the blokes who served during WWII would probably have thought the RAAF in the 1960's was nowhere near as good as it used to be, similarly, those of us who served in the 1960's think today's RAAF is not as good as it was and in years to come, you can be sure the people in today's RAAF will think 2025's RAAF has gone downhill.

We guess it's all relevant....



Then it was then time to leave the Base and drive back to Perth. Nicole was a wonderful host, she went out of her way to make us feel welcome, and although she must have been uncomfortable hopping in and out of the vehicle, she never once complained and we did hit her with some strange requests. We thank her very much for giving us her time. She is now well into her second pregnancy, and we wish her all the very best.

The very thought of being pregnant, let alone already having a child and staying in the RAAF was completely alien to Alanna and Ros but both were relieved to see that the RAAF has finally got things right.

One facility that was never provided 35 years ago is an on-base Child Minding Centre. This one is on Base at Pearce and is available for parents who work on the Base.



One the way back to Perth, the girls wanted to divert to the Parkerville Tavern which used to be a favourite Sunday afternoon hangout for Pearce-ites – and as we were out-numbered, divert we did.

