

The Katherine Region



Tindal (Carson) Airfield

Situated 15 km south of Katherine, Tindal was initially constructed from June 1942 as part of the RAAF's Aerodrome Selection Program. It was originally named after the pastoral property on which it was located as (Kit) Carson Field by the Americans.

The airfield was later named by the RAAF for Wing Commander Archibald Tindal, the RAAF's Area Armament Officer, who was killed by a strafing Japanese aircraft as he fired on the raiders at the RAAF Station during the initial attack on 19 February 1942.

The airfield was completed within months by September 1942 and further works were carried out in mid 1943. Although some aircraft visited the airfield, it was never used operationally and the only unit recorded there was No. 9 Replenishing Centre RAAF, from November 1942 to August 1943.

Tindal was further developed in the 1960s when Indonesian military action against Malaysia, dubbed 'Confrontation' (Konfrontasi), saw renewed interest in it as a tactical air base, its position just 330 km inland from Darwin. Part of Australia's counter to 'Confrontation' was strengthening defensive forces at Darwin and in the Top End.

From 1964 to 1969 No. 5 ACS upgraded the runway and facilities at Tindal and from late 1969 aircraft including Mirage III fighters and Canberra bombers began using the new facility.

In the early 1980s Tindal was further developed as Australia's front line fighter base and, as a result, community access to RAAF facilities there are restricted. The civilian airport operates from the western side of the runway.

Katherine Aerodrome

Katherine's role in aviation began in December 1919 when a strip was cleared adjacent to old Emungalan for Captain Wrigley and Sergeant Murphy on their flight from Melbourne to Darwin.

A further strip was cleared in 1923 and, with the extension of the North Australia Railway in 1926, a bridge across the Katherine River allowed a move to the new township of Katherine. With the town's development came the need for a permanent airfield and, in 1930, suitable land was secured.

In March 1934 Government Medical Officer Dr Clyde Fenton began operating medical evacuation flights from the new site 3km northeast of town.

Despite wet season flooding it was the fatal crash of Guinea Airways Lockheed 14 aircraft Koranga in January 1939 that prompted repair works to the aerodrome.

As part of the RAAF Aerodrome Selection Program, remedial work and an extension to the runway began in February 1942.

Katherine was attacked by nine Japanese Betty bombers on 22 March 1942 and, while damage was caused to parts of the aerodrome and the old Gallon Licence Store, one Aboriginal man, 'Dodger' Kajalwal, was killed during the raid while Noel Hall and another Aboriginal, Hector, were wounded.



Dust cloud from the bombing photograph - Katherine Historical Society

During the war a range of military aircraft used Katherine, although it was never used operationally. Problems with the runway saw Manbulloo and Kit Carson (Tindal) airfields constructed instead.

Post-war, the aerodrome remained in use until the RAAF redeveloped Tindal between 1964 and 1969. The last aircraft to depart the old Katherine Aerodrome was on 10 January 1975. The former 1945 terminal building is now a museum. The former aerodrome buildings are maintained and in good condition, although the runway, taxiway and apron have deteriorated.

Manbulloo Airfield

The third choice in selecting a suitable airfield in the Katherine area was Manbulloo.

Construction of the main 6,500 ft (1980m) runway and associated taxiways was initially undertaken by the 43rd General Services Engineer Regiment from April 1942 in the face of numerous difficulties.

As recalled by one of the engineers at the time: "All materials...had to be found locally...as this was truly the outback bush country...no local sources of water were available...except some waterholes...five miles distant."

Water was eventually found on the airfield site after a water tower was constructed on the banks of the Katherine River.

The Allied Works Council and the 808th Engineer Battalion (Aviation) completed the works and the airfield was operational by 19 May 1942.

No. 34 Squadron and its de Havilland DH 84 aircraft moved to the site from Parap on 26 August and was joined by No. 1 Repair and Salvage Unit the following day.

No. 6 Communications Flight under Flight Lieutenant Clyde Fenton moved in on 8 December 1942 and four days later 34 Squadron handed its aircraft over to Fenton's flight.

Further work to the airfield was carried out by No. 8 Airfield Construction Squadron from June to August 1943, while the 529th and 531st Squadrons of the 380th Bomb Group USAAF and their B-24 Liberators moved to Manbulloo on 8 June along with a detachment of the 15th Weather Station. They began operations against the Japanese in the Dutch East Indies in concert with the 528th and 530th Squadrons based at Fenton.

When Long Airfield east of Fenton was completed in October 1943, the two squadrons moved there the following month – much to their disappointment. As one former airman recalls of the Katherine Aerodrome:

"It was located near the Katherine river...[and] The swimming hole was complemented by an unexpected luxury, ICE. The town had an ice plant...[and was] located near an Australian hospital, complete with female nurses. The close proximity of these women would provide the...men with hours of fanciful diversion."

Manbulloo was little used to July 1944, when No. 24 Squadron RAAF and its B-24 Liberators moved in under Wing Commander John Hampshire. Moving in from 6 to 8 June 1944, the unit stayed only two months before moving north to Fenton to replace the 380th Bomb Group and Manbulloo was abandoned but for a caretaker unit.

By late 1945 the airfield was designated only as a RAAF Emergency Landing Ground and described as having no facilities. Currently the airfield is situated on private property on Manbulloo Station. The runway in reasonable condition and used for light aircraft operations by local parachute club.

Venn Airfield

Located 30 km southeast of Katherine, Venn airfield was constructed from 12 June 1942 and completed by late September.

The site was initially named after Lieutenant Wilson, an officer of the US Army's 43rd General Services Engineer Regiment which constructed it. It was renamed Venn after Flying Officer John Hester Venn, a former insurance clerk from Perth who was killed in action during a low level shipping strike over Ambon Bay on 13 May 1942.

The airfield officially operated from 15 February to 29 March 1943 but was never used operationally, although rare visits by aircraft were recorded, primarily in emergency situations.

Some later works to the airfield and taxiways was carried out by personnel of No. 8 Mobile Works Squadron (MWS) RAAF, which had formed at Ascot Vale in Victoria on 1 January 1943. During its time in the north No. 8 MWS personnel were engaged in works at Venn, Fenton, Long, Manbulloo and at Melville Bay in East Arnhem Land before departing in July 1944.

By late 1945 the airfield was designated as a RAAF Emergency Landing Ground. Currently only the runway and some remnant taxiway remain along with a 'Chinaman' used for sorting aggregate at the northern end of the site, which is on private property.

