

No. 1 Elementary Flying Training School, Parafield 1939-1944



A photo of Parafield during WWII. The control tower and hangar line were built for civilian use before the war, although the RAAF added two hangars of its own. Most the buildings behind the hangars were built by the RAAF and include rows of accommodation huts and classrooms. (RAAF Museum)

The story of the RAAF wartime training operations at Parafield has an antecedent in the circumstances of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia. The RACSA¹ was initially formed in 1926 as a Section of the Australian Aero Club. It was part of a national network of federally subsidised aero clubs established to assist in the development of civil aviation and train a pool of civilian pilots as a defence measure.

With the gathering of war clouds in the late 1930s the clubs argued that they should be involved in providing basic flying training for the RAAF. This was looked on sympathetically by the government as it seemed to be a much cheaper option than setting up new air force stations. In December 1939 a scheme was agreed where the RACSA would train air force pilots under RAAF supervision starting on 8th January 1940.

This training made use of the club's three DH-60 Moths and two Miles Hawks. The club had also purchased a DH-82 Tiger Moth, which arrived in February. New cadets were inducted in small numbers for a course of eight weeks duration. Three courses were begun which successfully trained 35 pilots in the first half of 1940. During this time training of civilian pilots ceased.

However, in the meantime the Empire Air Training Scheme had been negotiated, whereby the RAAF had agreed to train thousands of aircrews for service in Britain and elsewhere. The likely maximum output of pilot graduates from RACSA had been estimated at only 50. In addition, many of the key RACSA members were being called up for service (some as RAAF instructors) and had obligations elsewhere.

¹ RACSA was initially formed at the Australian Aero Club (SA Section). The Royal warrant was not achieved until 1936.

RAAF planners could see a need for training on an industrial scale, and not surprisingly the Aero Clubs did not fit into the future structure. Accordingly the RAAF took over all flight training operations at Parafield, and on 22 July 1940 the government impressed RACSA's two DH-60 Gipsy Moths, a Gipsy 1 engine and the DH-82. On this same date the RAAF took over the club's hangar at Parafield and RACSA activities subsequently went into abeyance for the duration of the war.

Meanwhile the air force presence at Parafield had begun in mid-December 1939 with the formation of No. 2 Flying Training School, which arrived from Victoria under the command of Squadron Leader F.J.B. Wight. The school was equipped with thirteen Gipsy Moths which flew in from Point Cook.

On 2nd January 1940 the name of the unit was changed to No. 1 Elementary Flying Training School, and a week later the first students were accepted comprising one officer and 22 cadets. A second course was begun in February (22 pupils) and a third in March (24 pupils). However during this time training was affected by shortages of aircraft, parachutes, armament and navigation equipment.

Despite these limitations the first and second courses both graduated on time in around eight weeks, possibly because many of those trainees already had flying experience (among the graduates of the second course was Bill Newton, who as a Flight Lieutenant in 1943 would win a Victoria Cross flying Boston bombers in New Guinea; he was executed while in captivity). The third course took much longer and didn't graduate until July – around eight weeks late.

Sadly, a fatal accident occurred on 19th March 1940 when at 0830 DH-60M Moth A7-72 crashed three miles north of Salisbury. The instructor, 44 year old Flying Officer Charles Cox, and his student, 19 year old Air Cadet Robin Overton Bowron, were killed. Both men were Victorians and were subsequently cremated in the Springvale Crematorium.

The cause of the crash was officially listed as 'obscure'. However, it may have been due to structural failure. The DH-60G Gipsy Moth had been the RAAF's basic trainer throughout the 1930s and the fleet had seen much use. The DH-60M model was referred to as 'Metal' Moths because they had a metal rather than wooden fuselage frame, which was stronger and more easily repairable. However the particular aircraft which crashed, A7-72, had been damaged in a forced landing at Point Cook in 1938.

There were several other instances of forced or 'hard' landings by Gipsy Moths being recorded by 1EFTS at Parafield, and in most cases the aircraft did not return to flying service and were reduced to components. By 1941 most of the Gipsy Moths had been replaced by the newer DH-82 Tiger Moths, which were more rugged and became the standard RAAF basic trainer during the war. 1EFTS received its first six new DH-82s on 20th April 1940.

On 29th April 1940 the school commenced Course No. 1, which was the designation of the first Empire Air Training Scheme course, but air training did not begin until 29th May. At this time preparations were made for the school to take over all training operations at Parafield, with RACSA to cease its operations. From 1st July 1940 1EFTS would have establishment strength of 18 aircraft, arranged in two flights, with another nine aircraft in reserve. This appears to have been a mix of Gipsy Moths and Tiger Moths, with the proportion of the latter increasing over time (another five Tiger Moths had been received in June).



An instructor helps a trainee out of a Tiger Moth at Parafield in 1940. Both are wearing bulky flying suits and the trainee has a parachute. (State Library of South Australia)

Each month a new course of trainees reported to 1EFTS for an eight week course, with two courses being run concurrently. The usual intake was around 30 trainees who had just completed a three-month (non-flying) course at an Initial Training School, which introduced the basics of air force life. Most of the 1EFTS intake came from 4ITS at Victor Harbor. On graduation from 1EFTS, most of the graduates were posted to a Service Flying Training School for advanced training. Most initially went to 1SFTS at Point Cook, although later many went to 6SFTS at Mallala. Some, however, were posted directly to an Embarkation Depot to undergo further training overseas (many went to Canada).

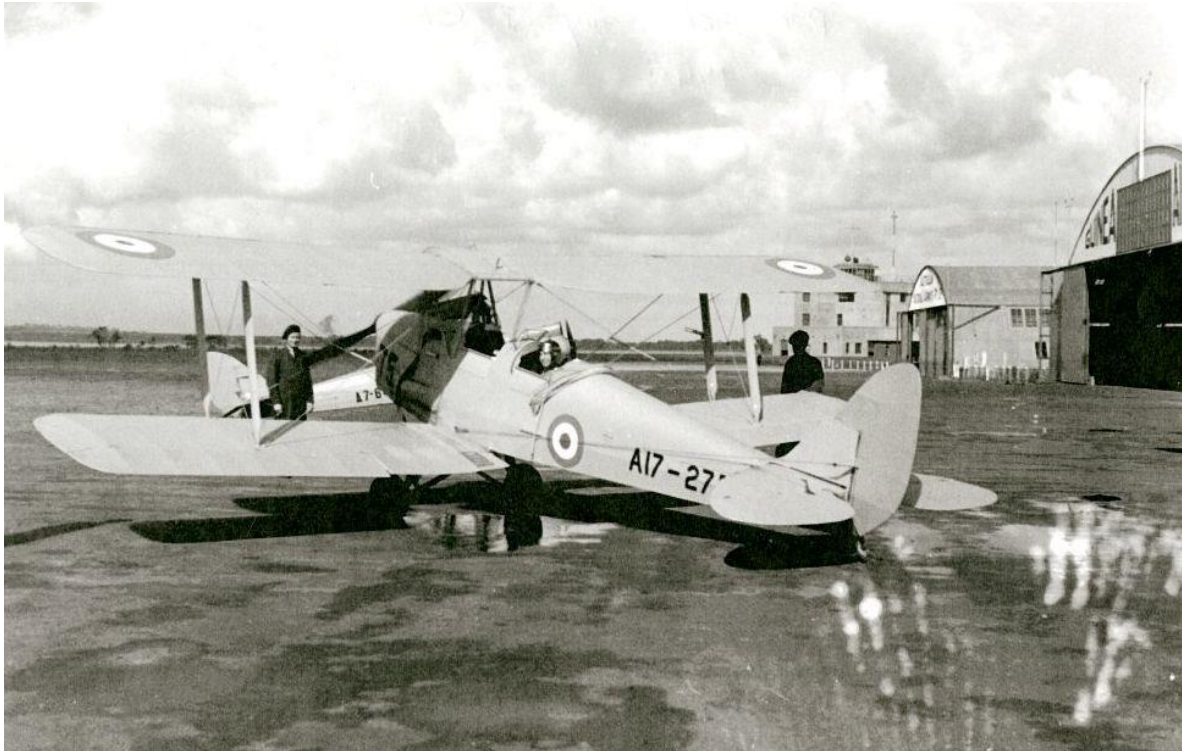
During each course some trainees would fail to graduate. Many of these men were posted to Air Observer schools to train as navigators. Others were 'bumped' into a later course and managed to pass after extra training. In September 1940 there were 16 instructors and 65 students at 1EFTS. In November the commanding officer of the school, Wing Commander Wight, was replaced by Wing Commander R. S. Brown.



A line up of Gipsy Moths, and two dark-painted Tiger Moths, at Parafield, circa 1940-41. (RAAF Museum)

During the last months of 1940, Parafield was regularly visited by other RAAF aircraft, including Ansons, Hudsons, Wirraways and Tiger Moths. Some of these were in transit to newly established units in Darwin or Western Australia. In March 1941 six of the Gipsy Moths flew out to Canberra, having been largely replaced by Tiger Moths by this time. In June a new type arrived when three Wackett trainers were received.

During the last months of 1941 the school doubled in capacity. The September intake was 60 students, and this would set the monthly pattern for the school until 1944. On 6th December 1941 command of the unit passed to Wing Commander J.R. Paget.



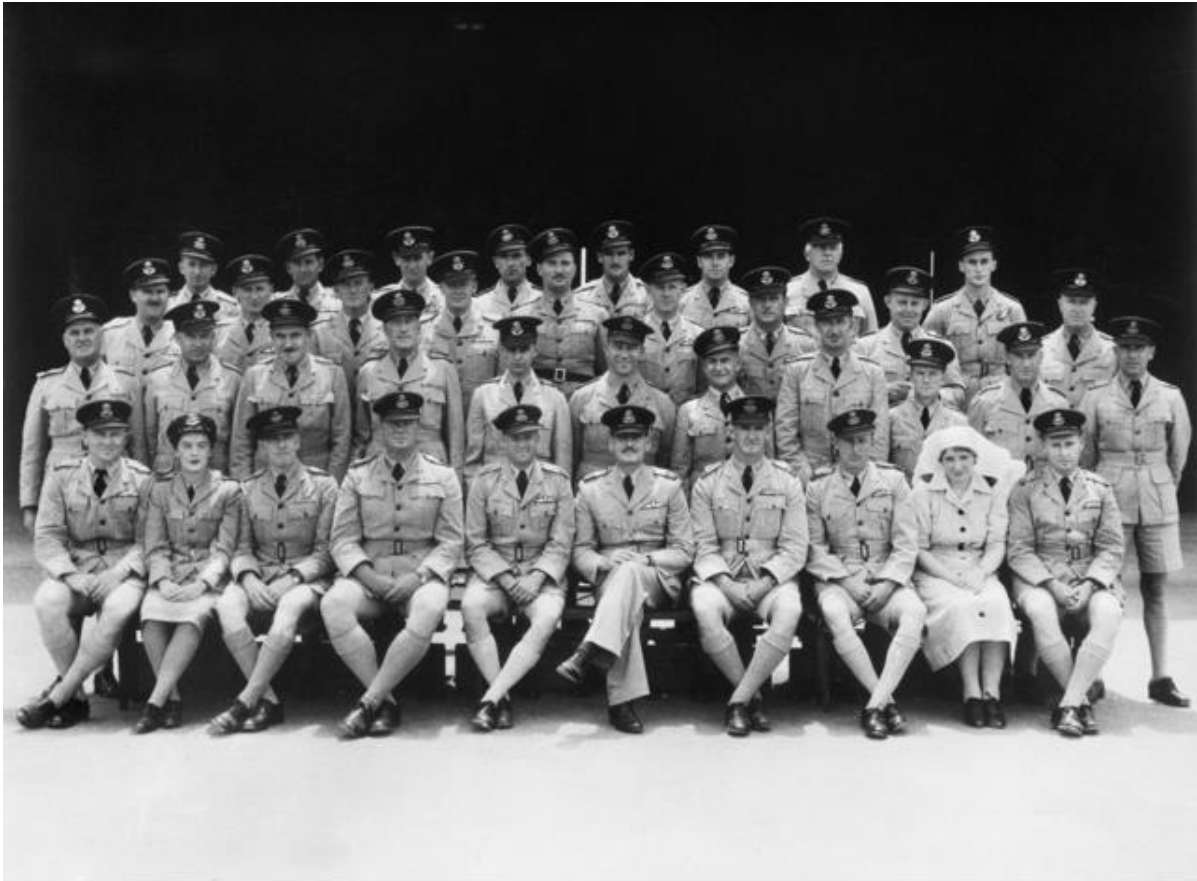
A yellow-painted Tiger Moth at Parafield in 1940, with a Gipsy Moth in the background. The Guinea Airways hangar is on the right. (South Australian Aviation Museum)

The commencement of war with Japan and the subsequent emergency measures had some obvious impact at Parafield. Slit trenches were dug, machine-gun posts were built and buildings were sand-bagged. Rifle practice was held at the Port Adelaide rifle range and regular aerodrome defence exercises were held.

The March 1942 course saw an intake of 70 Dutch trainees from the Netherlands East Indies. However this was short-lived as discussions were underway for a permanent Dutch air training school to be setup in the USA. Accordingly, on 27th March the Dutch ceased their air training and all had left Parafield by mid-April.

The first months of 1942 also saw some stresses as the RAAF built up its capability for local defence. It was hard-pressed to expand locally as well as continuing to meet its EATS training commitments. During these months training standards dropped at 1EFTS as the best instructors were posted elsewhere. Reflecting these pressures the school had three commanding officers during 1942: Wing Commander H. H. Kilby (appointed in May), Squadron Leader D.R. Williams (July) and Squadron Leader W.R. Wedgewood (December).

By mid-1942 the syllabus included night flying, but this was initially limited as only a handful of the trainers had the necessary equipment (presumably including lights). By this time a satellite landing ground was in use at Virginia where students practiced take-offs and landings. Also, during its time at Parafield 1EFTS made use of the Guinea Airways workshops for some of the maintenance tasks.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Group portrait of the officers of 1EFTS, Parafield, in December 1942. Sixth from left in the front row, wearing long trousers, is the commanding officer Squadron Leader W.R. Wedgewood. (AWM)

During the first half of 1943 1EFTS continued to run at its capacity, with around 60 trainees inducted each month. In June Wing Commander H. Plumridge took over as commanding officer, and he would be the last permanent commanding officer of the unit at Parafield². In the last months of 1943 operations were reduced somewhat, with the total number of trainees on hand falling from an average of 120 to below 100.

This was in preparation for the unit moving to Tamworth, New South Wales, in May 1944. Doubtless a reason for this move was that Parafield was a busy working airport, and from January 1943 No. 34 Squadron had been permanently based there. A transport unit, from mid-1943 No. 34 Squadron began operating a fleet of C-47 Dakotas from Parafield.

By the time of its move 1EFTS had successfully passed out 81 air cadets (from the original three courses in early 1940) and exactly 1,800 EATS trainees. Unfortunately, 1EFTS did not keep records of its precise size or aircraft fleet. However at the time of moving to Tamworth its strength was approximately 366 officers and other ranks, plus 64 WAAAF members (Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force). It also flew 55 aircraft to Tamworth, the majority of which were Tiger Moths.

² Plumridge was a long-time member of the RACSA and a committee member since 1931. He returned to the club after the war and served as its president in 1948-1949.

The safety record of 1EFTS at Parafield was generally very good. Aside from the fatal air accident in March 1940 mentioned above, three other fatalities occurred as a result of two other aircraft accidents. There were three other known deaths from other causes. All are detailed in Appendix 2.



RAAF headquarters building at Parafield during the war. (RAAF Museum)

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Main Sources

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A9845 39 Tiger Moth A17 [Accidents Part 9] Barcode: 7127223

A9845 44 Tiger Moth A17 [Accidents Part 14] Barcode: 7127228

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Nigel Daw private archives

SAAM archives

ADF Serials website

Appendix I

Aircraft Types Operated by 1EFTS, Parafield

CAC Wackett Trainer	three received June 1941
De Havilland DH60 Moth	30 identified as used by 1EFTS
De Havilland DH82 Tiger Moth	74 identified as used by 1EFTS
De Havilland DH89 Rapide	Two nominally on strength in 1940 during overhaul by Guinea Airways.
Miles Hawk	A37-4, A37-5 on strength 1941-42
Ryan STM-2 Trainer	A50-1, A50-4, A50-7 on strength 1943-44

Appendix 2 1EFTS Parafield Fatal Accidents

Five 1EFTS airmen died as a result of three aircraft accidents at Parafield. Another was killed in a ground accident while another died in a motor vehicle accident. Some uncertainty concerns the identity and circumstances of the death of an eighth man.

Date	Type	Killed	Details
19 th Mar 40	DH-60M A7-72	Flying Officer Charles Cox Air Cadet Robin Overton Bowron	At 0830 DH-60M Moth A7-72 crashed three miles north of Salisbury. The instructor, 44 year old Flying Officer Charles Cox, and his student, 19 year old Air Cadet Robin Overton Bowron, were killed. Both men were Victorians and were subsequently cremated in the Springvale Crematorium. The cause of the crash was officially listed as 'obscure'. Neither man has a service number on official records.
18 th Apr 40		9070 Aircraftman Class 1 Frederick Lister Edwards	Edwards was a 34-year old mess room orderly at 1EFTS. He was killed in an accident with a motor vehicle while riding a bicycle on Main North Road.
17 th Mar 42	DH-82 A17-236	29877 Leading Aircraftman Lewis Conway Rosenberg	At 2030 on 17 th March 1942, Rosenberg died from injuries when he was hit by the propeller of Tiger Moth A17-236 in the workshops of 1EFTS. He had been performing maintenance on the aircraft when he moved the airscrew when the engine was still 'alive'. The engine started and he was struck in the head. Rosenberg was a 40-year old with a wife and two children in Western Australia. He is buried in the West Terrace Cemetery.
20 th Jul 42	DH82 A17-236	416203 Sergeant Colin McDonald Broadfoot 417194 Leading Aircraftman Ian MacIntyre Hunter	At 0955 on 20 th July 1942 A17-234 was taking off and A17-236 was coming in to land at Parafield when they converged at 100 feet. In taking evasive action A17-236 made a steep climbing turn, stalled and crashed. The pilot, 26-year old Sergeant Colin Broadfoot was killed and 23-year old Leading Aircraftman Ian Hunter was seriously injured and admitted to the 105 th Military Hospital on Daws Road. Hunter died from his injuries eight days later on 28 th July. Both men were South Australians. Broadfoot was buried in the Mitcham Cemetery and Hunter was buried in the North Road Anglican Cemetery. A17-236 was the same aircraft involved in the fatal accident on 17 th March 1942.
24 th Aug 42	?	115087 Aircraftsman 1st Class Donald Francis Bicknell*	1EFTS records state that one trainee was killed in an aircraft crash at Parafield in August 1942. This was possibly 18-year old Aircraftsman 1st Class Donald Bicknell who died on 24 th August 1942, although the AWM Roll of Honour lists his cause of death as 'illness'. He appears to have been admitted to the 101 st Australian General Hospital at Northfield. From New South Wales, Bicknell is buried in the Centennial Park Cemetery. * Bicknell was not a member of 1EFTS but instead the No. 4 School of Technical Training, so it remains to be confirmed if this is the same death referred to in 1EFTS records.
10 th Dec 42	DH82 A17-419	416454 Flying Officer Maxwell John Pearce	At 1215 hours on 10 th December 1942 at the satellite landing ground (believed to be at Virginia), A17-419 crashed after a blind take-off. The pilot, Flying Officer Maxwell Pearce, was listed as 'dangerously injured' on the accident report but died from his injuries. The passenger, Leading Aircraftman V.C. Austen was only slightly injured. The cause of the accident was human error. Pearce was 31-years old and had a wife in Victoria. He is buried at Salisbury (St John's) Church Cemetery.