

Air Force Association

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AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION LTD SUBMISSION TO THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE MANAGEMENT OF DEFENCE ESTATE ASSETS

To the committee members

This submission is provided on behalf of members of the Air Force Association Ltd (AFA), including members of individual State Divisions. The submission is made due to overwhelming support for the matters described herein.

AFA thanks the committee for considering these matters in an objective and thoughtful manner, with due consideration to balancing the impacts to veterans, the needs of Government and the retention of nationally significant places for all Australians. Decisions taken by Government for disbursement of the Defence estate will be irreversible. The loss of a nationally significant entity will be felt by all and lost for future generations.

Yours sincerely,

Joe Iervasi, AM, CSC

Air Vice-Marshal (retd)

National President and Chair

Air Force Association Ltd

Air Force Association Ltd (AFA) Submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee regarding Management of Defence Estate Assets

The following *general* points are raised against the terms of reference (TOR) for consideration of the References Committee.

TOR B.

- Planning. Policy should ensure that divestment of Defence property should not be activated until the defence capability that utilises the site, if that capability is to be retained, is properly transferred to a new home. On this matter AFA notes the Department of Finance website includes the statement: Finance will work with Defence to sequence the transition of personnel and capability from sites and ensure that the Defence estate is positioned to support its operational and capability needs.

TOR C.

- Defence policy should be mindful of the contributions reserves and cadets make to both current and future workforce capability. The sites selected for these units are important for recognition of and connection to the ADF. These units also offer a two-way window between the community and Defence which is important for a healthy ADF/community relationship. AFA acknowledges Defence is undertaking a strategic review of the reserves and recommends any divestment decision needs to be informed by the outcomes of that review.
- There also exists a close relationship between cadets and veterans. Cadets regularly support commemorative events held through veteran organisations and are essential to the ongoing connections veterans have with their service. Indeed, due to ongoing operational commitments of the ADF, most of the ‘uniformed’ support to commemorative events is undertaken by cadets. Due consideration should be given to the proximity of cadet units and veterans’ establishments to ensure these bonds are not dislocated. A loss of support to the veteran community would be perceived as a sign of disrespect for their service and those of their comrades who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

TOR A, D, E and G.

- AFA recognises an opportunity for divestment initiatives to contribute more directly to the well-being of veterans in support of key recommendations of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans’ Suicide. A past example was the divestment of the Torrens Parade Ground Precinct in Adelaide from Defence to the South Australian State Government in the early 2000’s which has provided for a combined veterans’ facility which is regularly utilised for veteran community and commemorative events.
- Divestment for housing initiatives could also be prioritised to the veteran community, who would likely have an existing connection to the estate. And with veterans in residence there is a higher probability for the upkeep of historical, cultural and heritage facilities or memorials that may exist on site. In this way, Government would be demonstrating a viable and tangible response to the support of veterans, notably in the context of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veterans’ Suicide.

The following *specific* points are raised relating to the Defence estate of RAAF Williams – Point Cook.

RAAF Williams - Point Cook is one of 60 ADF sites identified for Full Divestment.

Point Cook is Australia's most important Aviation heritage site, established as the Central Flying School in 1913 as the first military flying base in Australia and just ten years after the world's first powered flight. It is a unique site world-wide, given its Australian Flying Corps and pre-World War One airfield hangars and buildings, seaplane base on the Southern Tarmac and the original living quarters. It exemplifies ongoing development through the 'flying boat' 1920s and 'golden age' of the 1930s through to its collection of World War Two buildings on the Northern Tarmac.

Point Cook is not only the birthplace of military aviation and the RAAF, but also the cradle of Australian aviation as the Defence Department-regulated and controlled civil aviation until the late 1930s with civil pilot and engineering training, along with aircraft certification being undertaken at Point Cook. Hence, it played an important part in the nation's military and civil aviation development during the 1920s and 1930s.

Point Cook was the departure point for the first north-south and non-stop east-west crossings, the first aerial circumnavigation of the continent, the first international flight from Australia and the centre for pilot and engineering training within Australia for many years.

It is associated with many famous Australian military and civil aviation names such as Richard Williams, George Merz, Ross and Keith Smith, Charles Kingsford-Smith and Charles Ulm and has played a major role in recruitment, training and instilling Air Force traditions and culture.

There also exists memorials of significance at Point Cook relevant to RAAF veterans and their families, being:

- The Australian Flying Corps Memorial at the northern end of the parade ground containing two scrolls with 11,401 names of those aviators who died on operational service up to 2016, both AFC and RAAF;
- The RAAF Centenary Memorial, commissioned in 2021, recognising 100 years of service to our nation; and
- The RAAF Chapel which houses laid up (retired) colours of RAAF units, and is a place of memory, commemoration, and service.

These memorials were purposefully dedicated at Point Cook in recognition of that site as the spiritual home of the RAAF. Indeed, Australia's first military aviation commitments to both the first and second world wars deployed from Point Cook, with their stories becoming legend. The RAAF's character, culture, and identity are deeply rooted in the foundations of Point Cook.

One other point. Since 1913, Point Cook airfield has acted as a natural buffer to the adjoining migratory water bird habitats to the east and the site remains a buffer to the approaching residential estates to the north west and agricultural activities to the south west.

The most appropriate way to preserve and maintain this important national heritage site is through transfer and ongoing operation by a public community trust for the benefit of the nation and all Australians.

A TRUST TO MANAGE THE POINT COOK AIR FORCE BASE

The Australian Government will soon hand over the management of the historically significant Air Force base at Point Cook. The base is recognised on the National Heritage List as one of the 126 places of outstanding historic, natural or indigenous significance to the nation. It sits alongside the Sydney Opera House, the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Great Barrier Reef as a part of what makes Australia unique in the world. The Government has announced that it will explore partnerships with heritage organisations and trusts to support heritage protection strategies as part of its divestment of the site.

A community trust is the best model to ensure increased employment and heritage tourism benefits while also retaining the national heritage significance of the birthplace of the military aviation in Australia. Management by a community trust has many benefits, including:

- More appropriate use of the site than medium to high-density housing and its consequent contribution to road congestion
- Sympathetic commercial development that brings employment to the area
- Opportunities for education institutions to establish a campus in the former RAAF College precinct
- Retention of the RAAF Museum with easier visitor access and improved facilities
- Community access for sport and recreation, as well as ongoing youth development through the defence cadet program
- Closer connection with the veterans' community for events and commemoration
- Congregation access for religious devotion in the historic RAAF Chapel of the Holy Trinity, as well as bookings for weddings
- Retention of the historic art deco officers' mess as a reception centre and hospitality venue
- Continued use of the airfield for RAAF Museum interactive heritage flying, Air Force Cadet flying, light recreational aviation and vintage aircraft joy flights, with no net increase in aircraft operations, no jet aircraft operations and no increase in RMIT flying training rates
- Ensured environment conservation by retention of the open space buffer with the adjoining RAMSAR Treaty wetlands and environmentally sensitive Point Cook Coastal Park
- Further integration with the Wyndham heritage and environment tourism attractions of Werribee Park Mansion, Point Cook Homestead, Point Cook Coastal Park and the biennial Avalon International Airshow

- As early as 1997, the Australian Government proposed divestment of the site and decided in 2004 to transfer it to a trust for use as a heritage tourism site, but it decided instead to retain the base for defence purposes. The transfer, then as now, would be in line with other notable examples of the transfer of former defence sites to trusts, such as the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust (1999) and the Point Nepean Community Trust (2003).

A community trust to manage the nationally significant Air Force base at Point Cook would be the best outcome to ensure greater community access, retain national heritage, protect the coastal environment and enhance Wyndham as a vibrant tourism destination.

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITIES

AFA understands that the Minister for the Environment and Water retains overarching responsibility for designated entities on the National Heritage List and the matters set out in The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (the Act).

One of the Objects in the Act is 'to provide for the protection and conservation of heritage'. Actions required to achieve this objective include:

- provisions to enhance the protection, conservation and presentation of world heritage properties and the conservation and wise use of Ramsar wetlands of international importance;
- provisions to identify places for inclusion in the National Heritage List and Commonwealth Heritage List and to enhance the protection, conservation and presentation of those places; and
- the involvement of the community in management planning.

AFA recommends the responsible department be engaged regarding matters of national heritage.