WWII FUEL STORES - LAKE BATHURST – Visitors’ Guide

On entering this historic site ponder the threat to Australia in 1943, when the Commonwealth Government decided hurriedly to construct emergency fuel dumps specifically for the RAAF. By 1943 Europe had been at war for four years and Nazi Germany threatened to dominate the world.

In the East, on 7 December 1941 Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbour in the Hawaiian Islands drawing America into war with Japan and Germany. Australia was attacked on 19 February 1942 when Darwin and later Broome were bombed. The Japanese air attack on Darwin was severe being led by the same carrier-based squadron which had attacked Pearl Harbour ten weeks earlier. Darwin endured a further sixty-two air attacks in the next eighteen months though none so intense as the initial attack in which Darwin was hit by twice the number of bombs dropped on Pearl Harbour. Twice the number of ships hit at Pearl Harbour were struck in that first raid on Darwin. The Australian homeland was indeed under attack.

In mid 1942 the Japanese Imperial Navy had thirty mother submarines patrolling Australia’s East coast between Brisbane and Eden. Over the next year, in that area, a total of 467 lives were lost through attacks by submarines on surface ships. Supply lines to Australia’s war effort in the Pacific were under threat as America came to our defence.

America urged the Commonwealth Government to rapidly construct new RAAF emergency fuel stores in secret locations. A total of thirty-two new and existing inland stores were prepared around the country at a total cost of one million pounds. America met two thirds of this cost.

THE SITE
Fuel to the site was delivered by rail tankers and then pumped through the pump house to underground tanks. Total storage at this site was 666,000 gallons (3,023,640 litres) in five underground tanks built at a cost of 50,000 pounds. In today’s terms that cost might equate to around $6M. A workforce of sixty people (including many indigenous people from Yass) were camped on a sloping area beyond the pine trees on the hill above the entrance to this site. Steel for re-enforcing was delivered from the rail at Tarago to a point near the camp site. Labour and equipment used in construction were in short supply with tractors etc. used having been deemed generally unsuitable for the War Effort. Bogging of equipment was common as there was no hard surface road entrance to the site. The Shell Oil Company of Australia was contracted to construct the tanks to exacting specifications.

Underground storage comprised three concrete reinforced tanks at 200,000 gallons, one at 54,000 gallons and another for ethyl fluid at 4,000 gallons. Because the fuel had an octane rating of only 80, ethyl fluid was added at the rate of approximately 600 to 1 to raise the octane rating (performance level) to 100, the level necessary for aircraft engines. (See reverse side for more technical information).

The nine acre site was acquired by the Department of Defence in 1943 as part of a national emergency fuel stores strategy. The site was secured with a man-proof fence and protected by two guards (American military officers). The guards boarded with families in Lake Bathurst village and left their dogs to guard the premises at night.

After the war, the site was decommissioned and sold back to the original landowners (Somerton P/L). In 1980 the property was sold to Lake Bathurst Petroleum P/L to be developed for commercial fuel storage and distribution. Underground tanks were cleaned and restored but the venture lapsed.

The property was purchased by the Dennett Family in March 2005 with the intention of retaining it as an historic site.

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70th Anniversary of the bombing of Darwin
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PHOTO GALLERY>>
TECHNICAL: Further explanation relating to ethyl fluid

Ethyl fluid contains about 60% tetraethyl lead and about 40% of two other liquids*. Tetraethyl lead (TEL) is the substance that increases the octane rating but if used on its own, it burns to produce lead and lead oxide both of which are solids and would gradually build up in the engine and damage it. The other two liquids are substances that contain chlorine and bromide which are volatile (gases) and go out in the exhaust, thus removing the lead from the engine. This discovery in 1921 was not a problem when there were not as many cars but when they increased and multiplied, lead pollution in the atmosphere did become a more acute problem. Similarly with aircraft, pollution was not problem in the 1940’s, quite unlike today.

*Tetraethyl lead 61.45%, Dibromoethane 17.85%, Dichloroethane 18.8%, Inerts & dye 1.90%

PICTURE GALLERY

Lake Bathurst WW11 Fuel Stores

Top row: left to right, hillside bunkers – fuel spill valve – display inside fortified concrete bunker

Middle row: heavily silted pump house – cleaned and excavated 2006 – now a peaceful home to swallows

Bottom row: one of three trackside fuel inlets - new rail tanker in 1937 – recommended further reading