

Walking the Lake

Rathmines Ramble

Correct as at 2nd July, 2018

Overview and Track Information

This easy 3.2km circuit around Rathmines Park, the heritage listed former site of RAAF Base Rathmines from 1939 to 1960. The walk is partially on the paved share paths of the signposted memorial track, including the section past the main surviving buildings, but it also includes dirt foot trails through the former WAAAF area, which has now reverted to bushland. If it's been raining this part of the track will be muddy.

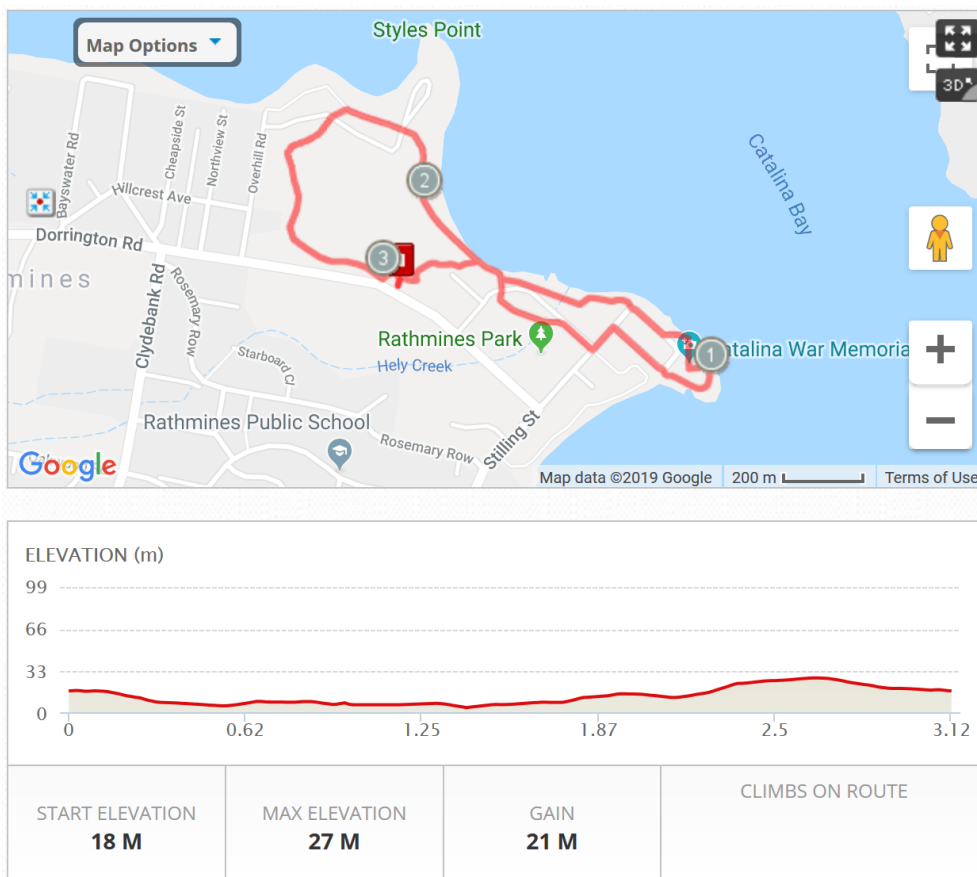


Meeting Point & Getting There

The meeting point is on Dorrington Road, Rathmines. Turn off Wangi Road and about 1km after the 60KPH speed limit sign you will pass the intersection with Overhill Rd. About 400m further on there is a lay by on the left-hand side of the road with a Rathmines Park Entry sign. That is the meeting point. There are public toilets along this walk.

Map and Elevation Profile

The walk begins and ends at the meeting point, which is shown as the green square on the map.



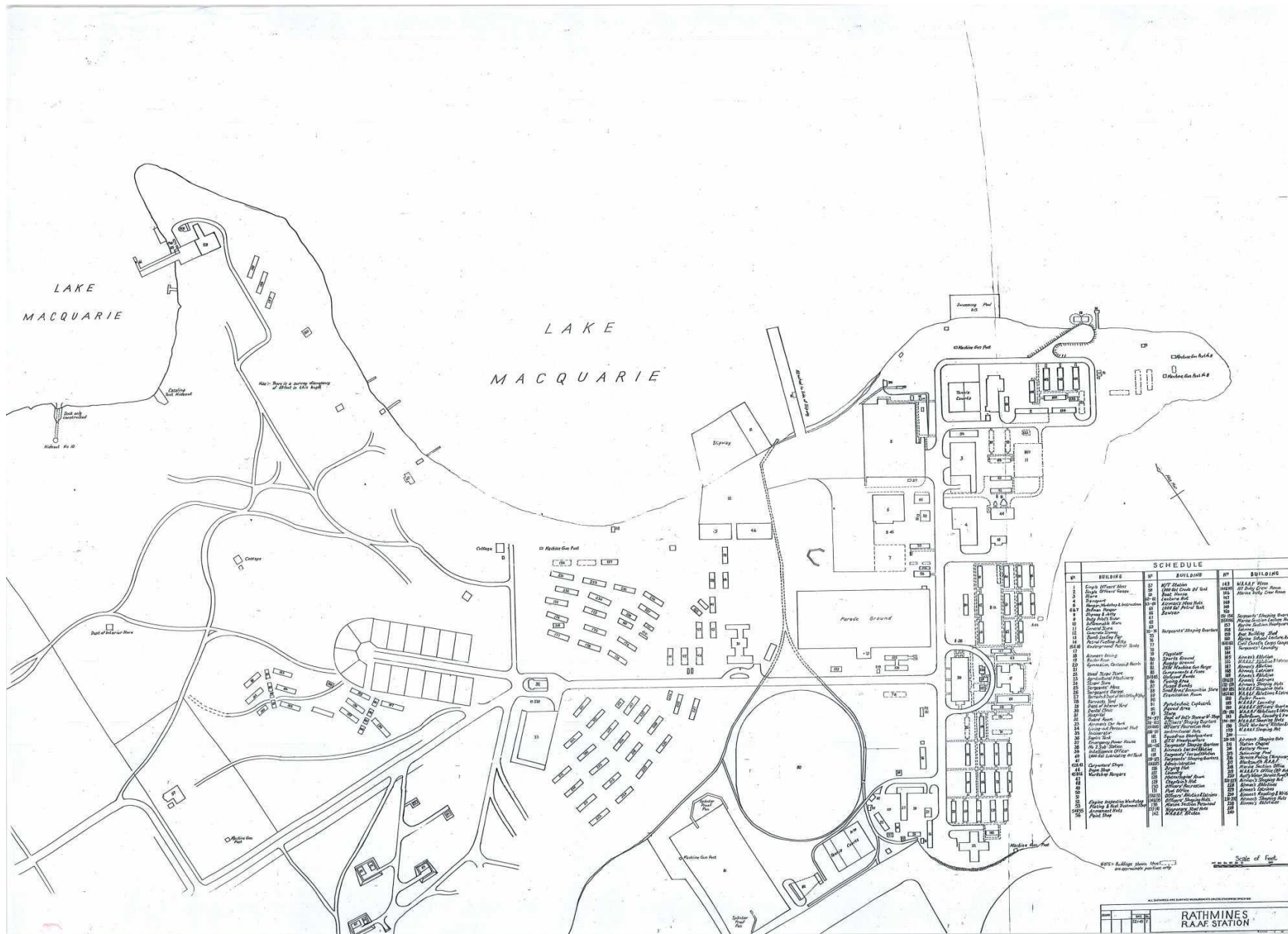
Background Information

“One of the few representatives of the ‘gentleman’ class of settlers about Lake Macquarie was Edward Hely, [who] settled at the lake about 1840, choosing an attractive site ... [and establishing] a prosperous farm.” The Hely family came from Rathmines, a small village near Dublin.¹

There's an excellent background about the RAAF base on the Lake Macquarie library site [at this link](#).

¹ K.H. Clouten, Reid's Mistake, Lake Macquarie Shire Council 1967

RAAF Base Rathmines 1945



Track notes

At the back of the meeting point is a wire rope fence with an opening for pedestrians. Walk through this opening onto a dirt trail. Almost immediately you will be in a four way track intersection. Turn right and take the heavily eroded track through the trees. The track soon swings left and descends a small hill.

At the bottom of the hill you emerge from the trees into the parkland of Rathmines Park. On your right is a public toilet block and in front of you on the side of the lake is the recently restored F Jetty, named for its distinctive F shape. Walk across the grass to the concrete path at the jetty.

Turn right and follow the concrete path towards the large open paved space, the former slipway and parade ground. Keep going straight ahead on the dirt vehicle path to the chain gate when the paved path swings around to the right. Go past the chain gate and onto the paved open space.

In front of you is almost all that remains of what was once the largest seaplane base in the Southern Hemisphere. The Rathmines RAAF seaplane base played a pivotal role in the defence of Australia in World War II and was the longest serving during the war effort. At one time Sir William Dobell was responsible for the camouflage of the base. Although about 230 buildings were erected throughout the life of the base only 10 remain today. Buildings you will see as you walk around are:

- The Catalina Conference Centre was once the air base hospital
- Club Catalina (Rathmines Bowling Club) was once the officers' mess.
- The Christadelphian Bible School was the main hangar.
- Rathmines Scout Hall was the inflammable liquids store.
- The Scout Hall storage area was once an electricity substation.
- The boat workshop was the ablutions building.
- Rathmines Community Hall was the former picture theatre and gym for the air base.
- The Rathmines Community Hall storage area was once a boiler house.
- The Westlakes Music Centre used to be the sergeants' mess.

Walk across the paved area towards the blue barracks-style buildings, then veer left towards the water and go around the left hand side of the fenced off Christadelphian Bible School. All of the buildings here are named for cities in the Holy Land.

After the bible school the foot track joins a roadway between the water and Club Catalina. Follow the roadway to the end then climb the hill to the RAAF Catalina memorial, opened in 1972. With a Catalina propeller on the top of the plinth, the memorial has 4 stone brick walls with plaques of deceased personnel who were associated with seaplanes at Rathmines between 1939 - 1960.

The Catalina was designed in the 1930s as a long-range reconnaissance flying boat. The Royal Australian Air Force used them not just for reconnaissance and rescue, but also as bombers in the war against the Japanese. The Catalinas had the highest loss rate of any RAAF aircraft in the south-west Pacific area.

Just past the memorial is a boulder with a small plaque, commemorating the naming of the previously nameless waterway as Catalina Bay in 2007.

After looking at the memorial, head downhill past the picnic shelter to the edge of the lake, then turn right and follow the track around the point.

As you walk up the other side of the point you will see a flight of concrete stairs in front of you. Climb the stairs then continue along the road, keeping the bowling club on your right. At the end of the road turn left onto Stilling Street, then, after about 80m, turn right onto the concrete memorial track. Walk along the track keeping the Christadelphian Bible School on your right.

Follow the memorial track for about a kilometre until you come to a sign on your left describing the airstrip. On your right and in front of you are several elevated metal baskets. These are "holes" for the Rathmines disc golf course.

Disc golf is played much like traditional golf, but instead of a ball and clubs players use a Frisbee. The sport was formalised in the 1970's and shares with "ball golf" the object of completing each hole in the fewest number of strokes (or, in the case of disc golf, fewest number of throws).

Continue along the pathway to a sign describing disc golf. There are public toilets off to the right.

After the sign turn left at the track junction and follow the vehicle track across the end of the old airstrip. On the other side you will see a foot track disappearing into the trees. Follow the foot track over a log.

The track winds through the trees for a while, with several other small foot tracks joining it. Keep following the foot track until it meets larger fire trail. Turn right and follow the fire trail through the trees.

After about 250m the trail enters a grassy open area. About 50m in front of you is a locked gate onto Overhill Street. Turn left and follow the faint foot track for about 50m through the scrub.

The foot track runs into a four way intersection. Continue straight onto the wider, yellow sand path. In a little while this path swings slightly left to parallel Dorrington Road and degenerates into a foot track. Follow the foot track for about 200m just inside the tree line with Dorrington Road on your right. This is the old WAAF lines, although all that remains are the concrete building foundations you can glimpse among the trees.

On this section some people choose to leave the foot track and walk along the road verge. This wimpy behaviour should not be encouraged.

The foot track emerges at the track junction near the lay by car park. Return to the cars.