

Local History - the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station

On top of the escarpment immediately opposite the pontoon is the current Riverside Corporate Park. This 28Ha site was established when the CSIRO moved to the area in the 1950's to support local manufacturing and primary industries. Whilst the CSIRO still occupies some of the site, there has also been substantial commercial development over the last decade or so with some of the buildings easily visible from the pontoon and river.

A lesser known aspect of the CSIRO's occupancy is described in the following quote from the SMH 26 May 1982: *"In secluded bush at North Ryde, a Korean wartime Hawker Sea Fury aircraft has a curious civilian role. Snapped up with another aircraft and an engine for a mere £100 by the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station in the 1950's, it now tests the weatherability of windows and sliding doors by creating economical wind and rainstorms at speeds of up to 150km/h..."*

Photos from the period show that the Sea Fury's folding outer wings were removed, and the airframe was mounted in a flying position high up on sturdy stilts. A chain mesh fence provided a suitable (for the time) security and OH&S solution. A large steel structure was erected behind the airframe for affixing the 'test' windows and structures, and a high capacity water sprinkler system installed to generate the rain. No doubt there was a long list of volunteers willing to 'pilot' the machine although it probably required more skills than 'employee of the month' might have been able to offer.



Source: Image of Sea Fury VW647 circa 1960's -used with permission from the John Hopton Collection
<http://1000aircraftphotos.com/Contributions/Hopton/5322.htm>

In the picture above, you can see on the horizon the TV Tower at the Mowbray Rd and Pacific Highway intersection, and the distinctive building to its right which appears to be the current Royal Pacific Hotel on the Pacific Highway at Artarmon. The LCRK pontoon is ~200m away in the valley below the enclosure – virtually in line with the distinctive building.

The aircraft shown in the picture is now in storage at the Camden Museum of Aviation who provide the following history: *“The aircraft operated with the Fleet Air Arm, 20th CAG, 805 Squadron on HMAS Sydney and with 723 Squadron based at HMAS Albatross. The aircraft was approved for issue to the Department of Works, Commonwealth Experimental Building Station, North Ryde on the 15th January 1959 to create high speed airflow to test modern high rise window glass and surround structure. The Museum acquired the aircraft in October 1969”*. The other aircraft is now on static display at the Fleet Air Arm Museum in Nowra.

The Hawker Sea Fury was originally designed in 1942 by Sidney Camm (of Hawker Hurricane fame) although did not see production until after WWII in 1946. With folding wings and an arrestor hook as standard, the aircraft was operated by the Royal Australian Navy and formed part of our then naval aircraft carrier capability. The Sea Fury was powered by an 18 cylinder Bristol Centaurus radial engine generating some 2,470 hp – entirely capable of generating a decent breeze.

It’s perhaps a pity the facility is no long operating. The roar of that 2470hp engine echoing up the river during the Time Trials would no doubt inspire a few personal bests. Or at least some worried scans for the approach of a speeding power boat?

References:

- SMH May 26 1982 - <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1301&dat=19820526>
- Sea Fury airframe history - <http://www.adf-serials.com.au/seafury.htm>