
RESEARCH PAPER

CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF MILITARY CAMPS AT MOUNT MARTHA AND BALCOMBE

Origin

The following information was provided by the then Patron, Lieutenant General K.J. Gillespie, AO, DSC, CSM, Chief of Army on 4th March 2010 (ref OCA/OUT/2010/R5088627), who wrote “Dear Frank, Please find enclosed a short brief on the history of military usage of the Mount Martha and Balcombe precincts. I think this information will certainly assist our research project. Best Regards, Ken”

Scope

1. This research paper documents the use of areas of Mount Martha and Balcombe in Victoria by the Australian Military Forces, as well as occupation and use by Allied forces and non-Government organisation from pre-Federation (i.e. from 1886) until 1999.

Location

2. The area of Mount Martha and Balcombe used by the military has not been pursued in detail but in general was:

- **Balcombe.** The estuary area south of Balcombe Creek running east from Port Phillip Bay to Nepean Highway and about 60 km south of Melbourne.
- **Mount Martha.** The area south of Balcombe Creek and including Beach Road (now Esplanade) to the west, Nepean Highway to the east and bounded to the south by Reservoir, Fairview and Ambulance Roads (now Glenisla Drive). Thick concentrations of encamped troops were often centred along the two main roads running east from Beach Road, being Buxton and Fairburn Roads (now Bay and Dominion Roads respectively). This excludes field training areas.

Approach

3. This research identifies any military usage with approximate periods of occupation and is based on records held by the National Archives of Australia (Melbourne), Central Army Records Office, the Australian War Memorial Collections data base, Militia pay and camp reports, Army telephone directories, Army and RAAF Location Statements and newspaper accounts of early military camps.

Land Usage

4. In summary, the areas and facilities examined were used as follows:

- Initially for Militia bivouac purposes often en route to other areas such as Bittern.
- For Militia training camps of several weeks duration using 12 by 12 foot tents and with semi-permanent support facilities such as water and latrines.
- After mid 1940 for semi-permanent unit accommodation in purpose built huts for Australian Imperial Force recruit training and other military training.

- Infantry basic training including live firing of small arms and grenades (some out to sea). Equipment trials related to Bren Gun Carriers and amphibious craft.
- In mid World War 2 for US Marines accommodation and training.
- In mid World War 2 for RAAF accommodation and training.
- In mid World War 2 for classified and covert unit training (Special Z Units).
- In mid World War 2 to circa 1990 for Army female accommodation.
- In late World War 2 for some non-government organisations such as orphaned groups.
- After building upgrades and new facilities were developed after World war 2, major complexes such as the Army Apprentices School and School of Signals were established and operated until circa 1990.

Unit level usage of the Mount Martha and Balcombe military area

5. Listed below is a chronological list of usage of the military area showing the formations and units for all three Services plus Allies and non-government organisations.

6. Where the records specify either Mount Martha or Balcombe this is noted in the summary, although many of the references examined simply describe the general area as 'Mount Martha Balcombe'. It is noted that reference to Balcombe (named after Lord Alexander B Balcombe 1811-1877) is not mentioned in conjunction with Mount Martha until after the start of World War 2.

Period	Formations/Units	Remarks
Pre 1929		
From 1886	Militia (Part Time)	Mount Martha used as bivouac area en route to training areas such as Cape Shanck
Mar 1909	Field Artillery Brigade	An example of Militia training. Bivouac and training
Jan 1923	3 Div Sigs	An example of Militia training. Bivouac and technical training at Mount Martha
1929-1939		
	Militia camps	Increased use due to Conscription with training areas at Bittern especially in late 1930s
Mar 1937	10 Bde camp	Typical Militia camp at Mount Martha with exercises between Mornington and Frankston
1939-1945		
May 1940		209 acres purchased and huts erected at Balcombe
Apr/May 1940	6 Bde Camp comprising:	6 BDE camp at Mount Martha allotted camp area to designated locations as follows:
(A typical 4 Div camp before Militia units	HQ 6 Bde 7 Bn 8 Bn 23/21 Bn 38 Bn	Between Dominion and Fairview Rds, Buxton Rd, Buxton Rd, End of Dominion Rd,

Period	Formations/Units	Remarks
were mobilized)	15 Fd Bde 2 Arty Svy Coy RAE S Comd Sigs 6 Fd Amb AASC AAOC 4 Mob Vet Coy YMCA, Canteen, Post Office, Bank and Works Dump	South side of Buxton Rd, East end Fairburn Rd, East end Fairburn Rd, North East end Fairburn Rd, North East end Fairburn Rd, South of Ambulance Rd, South of Buxtoil Rd, South of Buxton Rd, East end Buxton Rd, and North side Buxton Rd
Jun 1940	AIF Recruit Camps, eg. 11 Recruit Trg Depot	Recruits (5000) from Williamstown Racecourse and Caulfield sent to new tented Mount Martha Camp. Circa late 1941 most went to Royal Park and further
Sep 1940	Mobilised 4 Div units: 2 Bde 5 Bn 6 Bn 14 Bn 32 Bn 10 Fd Bde 15 Fd Bde 4 Div RAE 4 Fd Pk RAE 2 Fd Amb No 1 Sec 3 Vet Hos	Mount Martha. Most units had moved further north by early 1943
Sep 1940	Mobilised 4 Div units: 6 Bde 7 Bn 8 Bn 23/21 Bn 38 Bn 4 Div Sigs 6 Fd Coy RAE 6 Fd Amb 4 Fd Hyg Sec 4 Div AASC	Balcombe. Most units had moved further north by early 1943
Nov 1940	50 Camp Hospital	Hospital at Balcombe last noted in late 1945
1942	Australian Women's Army Service and (from 1950) 30 Women's Royal Australian Army Corps Barrack	Located at Mount Martha House, 468 Esplanade until 1978. Included an officer training facility
1940	Armoured Fighting Vehicle School	Arrived 28 December and left for permanent site at Puckapunyal on 15 February 1941
July 1941	14 th Australian Armoured Regiment	Unit was later renamed 104 th Motor Regiment. Regt were in Balcombe from July 1941

Period	Formations/Units	Remarks
Mar 1942	13 Light Horse Regiment to camp	Mount Martha. Mounts returned and unit motorized March 1943. To Puckapunyal May 1943
Late 1942	US 1 st Marines Division	Heavy US forces presence at Balcombe after the Guadalcanal campaign. Practised beach landings with HMAS Manoora near Dromana. US Marines left for New Guinea September 1943
Mar 1943	19 US Construction Bn (Seabees)	Arrived at Balcombe from Noumea. Left for New Guinea September 1943
Aug 1943	RAAF Staff School	Uralla Rd, Mount Martha until September 1946
Jun 1944	Mount Martha Research Station (Z Special Unit cover name)	Mount Martha. Secret training school for signals, language, mock attacks with RAN work boat. Departed for Darwin and Morotai in April 1945
Jun 1944	School of Eastern Interpreters	Classified espionage training unit at Mount Martha. Departed August 1944
Aug 1944	RAAF units: 2, 8, 6, 7 and 9 Airfield Construction Sqns	Uralla Rd, Mount Martha. Various dates to April 1945
Dec 1944	Italian POWs	Records noted escapees from Mount Martha Detention Centre
Dec 1944	Camps for orphaned children and others such as Sons of POWs	Military use of Mount Martha decreased circa 1944 and facilities were often used for philanthropic reasons. Last use by philanthropic organisation noted early 1946
Post 1945		
Dec 1945	School of Signals	Bay Rd, Balcombe to June 1970 then to Watsonia
Jun 1948	Army Apprentices School	Bay Rd, Balcombe. Ceased December 1982 (3000 tradesmen trained with 10 subsequently killed in action)
Jun 1948	School of Military Survey	Transferred to Bonegilla in December 1965 and subsequently relocated to Bendigo
Circa 1965	Various units including: Camp Administration. S Comd Provost Det School of Music	Listed as Mount Martha, but probably Balcombe
1983		Balcombe camp closed and land control assumed by the Mornington Shire in 1983
Aug 1999		Last Balcombe camp house relocated in 1999
Feb 2001		Army Apprentices School plaque unveiled. Memorial Gates and Mace Oval declared a Heritage Place