



Heritage Citation



U.S. 7th Fleet Officers' Club (Limbless Soldiers' Club)

Key details

Also known as	Riverside Ballroom
Addresses	At 42 Oxlade Drive, New Farm, Queensland 4005
Type of place	Hall, Defence site
Period	World War II 1939-1945
Style	Stripped Classical
Lot plan	L8_RP42953; L207_RP42953; L9_RP42953; L12_RP42953; L208_RP42953; L3_RP42953; L209_RP42953; L16_RP42953; L15_RP42953; L14_RP42953; L13_RP42953
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 30 October 2000 Date of Citation — August 2010
Construction	Roof: Corrugated iron; Walls: Face brick

People/associations

Seabee Construction Battalion (Builder);
United States Navy (Architect)

Criterion for listing

(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (D) Representative; (F) Technical; (H) Historical association

This building was constructed in 1943 for one of the largest US Navy bases of the Pacific War - Base 134 Brisbane. Built as the 7th Fleet Officers' Club/Mess, it featured an unusual design that incorporated dual 'igloo' structures. After the war, the site was leased to a returned servicemen's organisation – the Returned Limbless Sailors and Soldiers Association and became known as the 'Riverside Ballroom'. The property is currently operated by the RSL. Brick additions in the austere Postwar International style were added to the building in the early 1950s.

History

On 14 April 1942, the US submarine tender Griffin and six old US submarines S-42 to S-47 and S-53 sailed up the Brisbane River and berthed at New Farm. They were soon joined by five more S-boats (ex-US Asiatic Fleet) S-37 to S-41 that were sent across from Fremantle in Western Australia. This was the beginning of a permanent United States Navy (USN) presence in Brisbane.

The initial facilities allotted to the USN comprised a small office for the Naval Supply Depot (NSD), an office for the Submarine Repair Unit (SRU) and repair shops for periscope and other submarine parts. A small amount of storage space was made available in some of the New Farm wool stores. Local accommodation was provided for 252 USN officers and enlisted men.

On 30 March 1942, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) announced a new Allied command structure for the Pacific War theatre of operations. Australia was included in the new South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) that was to be commanded by the US Army's General Douglas MacArthur. At first, MacArthur established his SWPA Headquarters in Melbourne but he transferred his HQ to Brisbane on 20 July 1942. Thus Brisbane increased in strategic importance. MacArthur, as an US Army general, was unable to obtain an allotment of major USN warships (particularly aircraft carriers) from his rival Admiral King but the USN did have a large strike force of submarines based in the SWPA. Two important USN submarine bases were established in Australia, on the west coast at Fremantle and on the east coast at Brisbane. All USN facilities at Brisbane were operated as a single establishment designated US Naval Base 134.

The USN created a new fleet to operate under MacArthur's SWPA Command on 15 February 1943. This was the now famous US Seventh Fleet. Headquarters for the 7th Fleet was established in leased offices in the Commercial Bank of Sydney Chambers (239 Queen St) next to MacArthur's HQ in the AMP Building in Brisbane City. USN personnel allotted to the 7th Fleet grew during 1943. Eventually living quarters and messing facilities were provided for a shore-based personnel peak of 6,464 USN officers and men. Most facilities were concentrated in or around New Farm. In 1942, the USN established its Receiving Barracks, Bachelor Officers Quarters and Dispensary at New Farm Park, its Naval Base HQ at New Farm and leased both the Brisbane Stevedoring Company's New Farm Wharf and the Newstead Wharf. In 1943, the USN opened a NSD, Bachelor Officers' Annexe at the Waterloo Hotel, an Audio Visual Aids Training Centre and a tennis court, all at Newstead.

On 4 November 1943, the USN leased a block of land that ran down to the Brisbane River, located at 42 Oxlade Drive at New Farm. The land was acquired through the Australian Army Hirings Service from the Brisbane City Council. The purpose was to construct an entertainment venue for the exclusive use of USN officers. Many USN officers had complained that there were so few places of entertainment in Brisbane for them. Brisbane's hotels and picture theatres were becoming increasingly overcrowded as more and more service personnel were either sent there on leave or on assignment. Having spent many weeks on combat patrol in the cramped conditions of a submarine, the USN officers did not view favourably the crowded conditions that they found in Brisbane's entertainment venues. Accommodation facilities were good as submarine captains on leave in Brisbane were assigned a house with a cook and steward while other officers were in flats or hotels. But it was noted that "for the officers, it was generally a quiet leave of long walks, time at the beach, and preparations for the next patrol."¹ So it was decided to construct the New Farm USN Officers' Club/Mess.

When acquired by the US Navy, the vacant site could not be used for immediate building purposes until a considerable amount of fill was placed to bring the elevation of the property up to a more or less even grade. The USN constructed two 40 feet x 100 feet prefabricated steel 'Stran' buildings. The two buildings were joined by means of a steel-frame constructed foyer between the units that allowed all-weather access between buildings. The single building usage of dual 'igloo' style buildings was quite unusual in wartime Brisbane. An US Naval Construction Battalion (the Seabees) oversaw the construction work. Either the 55th Seabees unit or the 84th Seabees unit, both based at Brisbane during the War, may have been involved with this project. The Seabees were quartered at Camp Seabee on Eagle Farm Road at Eagle Farm and they would have been trucked to the site on a daily basis during construction. The USN in Brisbane favoured the 'Stran' design of a large military building, as it had been used for the accommodation barracks built for the USN Mine and Torpedo Depot at Mt. Coot-tha.

The USN Commissioned Officers' Club was more than just an officer's mess (kitchen and dining hall). Two 35mm film projectors and a projection booth screened the latest Hollywood movies for the officers and their invited guests. It had a bar and hosted officers-only dances organised by the US Naval Base 134. As the Officers' Club building was a USN facility it did not have to abide by the alcohol ban at dances that was Queensland law. Also the USN was able to obtain alcohol supplies from the USA thus overcoming the severe rationing that existed in Brisbane. Three USN personnel and 17 civilians permanently staffed the Officer's Club. Those civilians who were employed by the USN as mess stewards were issued with white steward uniforms. Along with these facilities and the excellent job of outside landscaping undertaken by the USN, the 7th Fleet's Commissioned Officers' Club/Mess was soon recognized as a Brisbane River showplace in what had become one of the largest US fleet bases in the SWPA.

The peak for USN officers stationed in Brisbane reached 685 on 1 June 1944. In addition, the USN Colmslie Seaplane Base, Camp Seabee at Eagle Farm, the USN Rest Camps at Coolangatta and Toowoomba, and the Leave Area at Surfer's Paradise and Redcliffe accommodated another (approximate) 200 officers. All were granted access to the Officers' Club at New Farm. The USN nurses allotted to the USN Fleet Hospital Mobile No.9 at Camp Hill (the present site of Lavarack Park) were automatically granted officer rank and also had the right to use the Officer's Club at New Farm. By April 1945, the USN was relocating its facilities from Brisbane to the recently liberated Manila in the Philippines. The USN ended its lease of the 42 Oxlade Drive site on 4 June 1945.

The large buildings left behind in Brisbane by the Allied forces were very important in 'kick-starting' that city's post-war industrial boom. The former USN Officers' Club at 42 Oxlade Drive, New Farm is unusual in that it did not become part of this industrial boom but rather was quickly re-used for the benefit of returning Australian servicemen. On 5 March 1946, the Queensland branch of the Returned Limbless Sailors and Soldiers Association (RLSSA) was granted a 30-year lease of the former USN site by the Brisbane City Council. The nominal rent was set at £5 per annum. The USN Officers' Club became the clubhouse for the RLSSA that offered

both meeting rooms and entertainment facilities.

In 1948, the RLSSA opened a bowls club on the site to provide recreation facilities for its members. The Merthyr Bowls Club now operates these facilities. In the early 1950s, an additional club house, designed in the austere Postwar International style, was added to the site. The RLSSA gained Council approval for a new garage to be added to the site on 19 April 1962 and for alterations and additions to the former USN Officers' Club building on 19 July 1962. The RLSSA also maintained a small office on the ground floor of the building at 596 Stanley Street, South Brisbane.

The RLSSA raised funds by leasing out its premises for wedding receptions and other functions. As a result, the site became known popularly as the 'Riverside Ballroom'. Most recently, as it is operated by the Returned Services League (RSL), it is called 'RSL Riverside'.

In 1989, the former USN Officers' Club was recognised for its heritage significance when it was listed in the New Farm Heritage Trail booklet produced by the Brisbane City Council. In 1995, the property was identified as a potential heritage place in Council's New Farm Heritage Survey. It was entered onto Council's City Plan Heritage Register (CPHR) on 30 October 2010.

Description

The main building comprises two steel-framed 'igloo' structures joined by a central, timber-framed foyer space. The roof sheeting is of curved, corrugated galvanised steel that is painted.

In the early 1950s, brick additions in the streamlined Postwar International style were added to the igloos.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history

as the United States Navy's officers' club constructed when Brisbane was a major World War Two US submarine base.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage as the only surviving example of a World War Two building design utilizing dual 'Stran' prefabricated 'igloo' structures.

Representative

CRITERION D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places as it displays the structure and form typical of prefabricated World War Two buildings.

Technical

CRITERION F

The place is important in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technological achievement at a particular period through its use of materials and construction methods to quickly build free-span structures under restrictive wartime conditions.

Historical association

CRITERION H

The place has a special association with the life or work of a particular person, group or organization of importance in the city's or local area's history through its association with the World War Two US Navy, the Returned Limbless Sailors and Soldiers Association (Qld) and the Returned Services League.

References

1. David Jones & Peter Nunan, *U.S. Subs Down Under - Brisbane, 1942-45*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2005), p.150
2. Brisbane City Council Aerial Photos 1946, 2001, 2005

3. Brisbane City Council, Minutes of Meeting of 5 March 1946
4. Brisbane City Council, *Properties on the Web*, website, post-1946 building cards
5. Brisbane City Council, *New Farm Heritage Trail*, (Brisbane: BCC Heritage Unit, 1989)
6. Ford, Jack, *Allies in a Bind*, (Brisbane: Ford, 1996)
7. Jones, David & Nunan, Peter, *U.S. Subs Down Under - Brisbane, 1942-45*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2005)
8. USN Bureau of Yards and Docks Section, *Defense Aid – Reciprocal and Review Board Report – General - US Naval Base, Navy 134, Brisbane*

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Note: This citation has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes available. The purpose of this citation is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

Citation prepared by — Brisbane City Council (page revised April 2023)



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