

A brief history of the Seletar Air Base

Royal Air Force (RAF) Seletar began operations in 1928 and became an official RAF station on 1 January 1930. It was Singapore's first purpose built airport as well as the largest and oldest RAF base in the Far East.

The base was constructed on former marshy land reclaimed by hundreds of Samsui women whom the British called 'Concrete Lizzies'. It became one of the most important RAF bases in the Far East, guarding vital trade and transport routes. Seletar could accommodate normal planes as well as seaplanes. It served as a model for the rest of the British Empire and was also Singapore's first civil airport until the completion of Kallang Airport in 1937, when Seletar reverted to a purely military role.

As such, Seletar hosted many aviation luminaries including Kingsford-Smith and Amy Johnson, famous aviators who stopped over in Singapore on their record-breaking flights. It also hosted the noted British playwright Noel Coward and comic actor Charlie Chaplin.

The surrounding area accommodated military uses as well as buildings that were homes to different classes of servicemen. These buildings, ranging from 'Black & White' bungalows of various sizes, to Modern style houses of the 1950s, were laid out in a landscape of rolling hills, picturesque trees and winding roads that were named after places in London. This was apparently an attempt to lessen the sense of homesickness for personnel who were posted far from home.

Until its closure as an RAF base in March 1971, except during the Japanese Occupation, Seletar served as a supply and maintenance base for all aircraft of the Far East Air Force (FEAF). In particular, Block 450 served mainly as the barracks for servicemen from 390 Maintenance Unit (MU).

Following the British Government's decision to withdraw all British forces east of Suez by the mid-1970s, Seletar Air Base was officially handed over to the Singapore Air Defence Command (SADC), which in 1975 became the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF). After the handing over, the eastern side of the base was taken over by the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) for military use. The western side was used for civil aviation and became accessible to the public again. Singapore also took over its first land-based air defence weapon system from the British, the BAC Bloodhound Mk2 surface-to-air missiles, which were located in Seletar.

The origins of 160 Squadron

160 Squadron was officially formed on 1 June 1970, under the command and control of the SADC, and is the first and longest serving air defence unit of Singapore. It operated the 35mm Anti-Aircraft (AA) Oerlikon Gun, which was the first air defence system procured by the SAF, and the Basic Giraffe radar, as part of Singapore's multi-layered air defence. In 1972, the unit came under the direct charge of the Director General Staff Division, MINDEF. In 1973, command of the unit was transferred to HQ Singapore Artillery. With the formation of HQ Singapore Air Defence Artillery (SADA) as part of the RSAF in 1979, 160 Squadron was handed over from HQ Artillery to HQ SADA in 1980, bringing the unit back to the Air Force.

Seletar East Camp served as 160 Squadron's first home from 1970 to 2002, with the unit occupying several blocks (including Block 450) and a parade square. In particular, Block 450 was where 160 Squadron's 'Alpha' Flight was located, hence it was also known as 'Alpha Block'. Throughout the years, many dignitaries, including the late President Sheares and the late Dr Goh Keng Swee, have visited the Squadron.

Within 160 Squadron, 'Alpha' Flight was the key department tasked with both training and day-to-day operations of the 35mm AA Oerlikon Gun. Many AA Gunners from 160 Squadron spent a significant amount of time at Alpha Block. It was a place where they sweat and toiled, where they celebrated and rejoiced, and where strong friendship bonds were formed. Although 160 Squadron moved out in 2002 to Chong Pang Camp, the old premises still hold fond memories for many AA Gunners of 160 Squadron.



View of Block 450 from the old parade square



Art-Deco style motif on the column capitals



End elevation showing the generous corridors and roof eaves



President Sheares visiting 160 Squadron, 1971



Aerial view of the British Royal Air Force base in Seletar - Block 450 highlighted



Seletar East Camp was home for AA gunners, 1970 to 2002



5th NCO course, 1992



End of course ceremony, 1988



Rest and recreation, 1994



Winning the Best Unit, 1990/91



Winning the Best Unit, 1994/95



Chinese New Year decorations, 1994

Understanding Block 450

Block 450 was constructed in 1930 as a two-storey building, with a third storey added in 1936. The building comprises a 90 meter long main block and 2 service blocks (one served as bathrooms and the other served as the armoury) projecting from the middle. There are also corridors all round and 2 staircores at both ends of the symmetrical building.

As a response to the humid tropical climate, the building has continuous shady verandahs, open metal parapets, an inner facade featuring timber-louved windows, doors and pre-cast concrete vents to promote cross-ventilation. Together with the surrounding green landscape, cool and comfortable interiors are created. Built in the then relatively new medium of reinforced concrete and fitted with traditional timber windows and doors, the building is a combination of traditional and modern design approaches.

Designed with economy, efficiency and comfort in mind, the pared-down detailing, simplicity and elegance of expression exemplify the Tropical Art-Deco style, favoured by the British military in the years leading up to World War 2.

Other features include a unique Art-Deco style motif on the column capitals which help to adorn and differentiate this building from the others in the air base.

Singapore's Conservation Programme

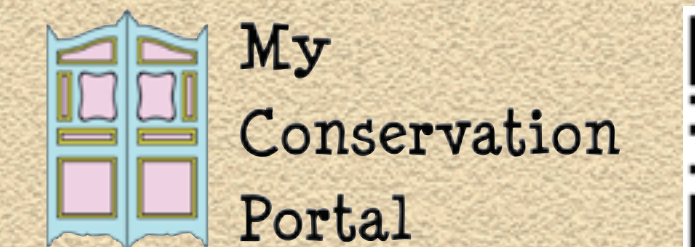
Singapore has an on-going conservation programme under the URA that started in 1989 and has to date, resulted in the selective protection of over 7000 buildings of architectural, historical and social importance all over the island.

34 buildings in the former Seletar Air Base area were conserved in 2014 as part of retaining the significant architectural, historical and social landmarks of Seletar even as it undergoes further development as an aerospace hub. In conserving 32 bungalows, Block 179 (former RAF HQ) and Block 450 (former 160 Sqn Alpha Block) for future re-use, a link is created for Singaporeans to understand the rich military and aviation heritage of the area and of our country.

This storyboard was officially unveiled on 23 May 2015 by Mr Chan Chun Sing Minister (Prime Minister's Office)

This storyboard was created in partnership between 160 Squadron, 160 AA Alumni and the URA, as part of 160 Squadron's 45th Anniversary celebration. We would like to acknowledge the support granted by NLB, NAS, MINDEF, SLA, JTC and RAF Seletar Association.

For more information, please visit:



Visit the 160 AA Alumni Facebook page at:



If you have any feedback or queries on this storyboard, please contact URA at: ura_conservation_cso@ura.gov.sg or call us at 63293355.