

Special Use Airspace

Special Use Airspace (SUA) is a generic term for what used to be “PRD” areas. They’re the ones bounded by red lines on your charts – the airspace designed for specific operations that may have limitations for aircraft not involved in those operations. It covers Prohibited, Restricted, Danger and Military Operating Areas.

Restricted Areas

There aren’t any Prohibited Areas in Australia these days, so let’s start with Restricted Areas. All Restricted Areas fall into one of three categories – Conditional Status RA1, RA2 and RA3. The status indicates the likelihood of you getting a clearance to fly through it.

- RA1 – this is managed like controlled airspace, so you can plan and expect to get a clearance through these areas. It doesn’t mean a guaranteed clearance at your requested level or track. That will depend on other activity, just as in normal controlled airspace. Very few Restricted Areas are RA1.
- RA2 – you may not plan or expect a clearance when it’s active. However, ATC may offer you a clearance through the area on an opportunity basis. This is the most common one.
- RA3 – you can’t plan through and won’t get a clearance through this airspace when it’s active.

For instance, R233A, east of RAAF Base Edinburgh in South Australia, from SFC to 2500 ft, is RA1, which means pilots can expect a clearance allowing them to take off from Gawler. On the other hand, R155B, north of Pearce and extending down to ground level, is RA2, so if it’s active you can’t expect a clearance. Thankfully R156, just north of it, is only active above 4000 ft, so if you’re flying your 182 from Northam to Dongara, you just stay east and get a few miles north of Calingiri before turning left and heading for the coast.

R155B and R156 are both activated by NOTAM, so if they’re not on NOTAM’s as active then they’re fair game – no clearance required. But R134C, west of Bindoon, is RA3 and its active hours are H24, which means it’s a permanently “Don’t even think about asking for a clearance” area.

A lot of Defence airspace used to be active unless stated otherwise via NOTAM. These days it’s the other way round – deactivated – unless NOTAMs say it’s active. There are a few pieces of information you want to know if you’re going anywhere near SUA:

- Conditional status – RA1, 2 or 3;
- Purpose of the airspace;
- Upper and lower limits;
- Whether it’s active;
- Times it’s active.

The first three of these, which typically don’t change, can be found in a few places:

- ERSA SUA section;
- Charts (VTC, VNC, ERC and TAC) – they all have a box containing details of areas, categories (conditional status), and whether they’re activated at set times or by NOTAM. The SUA is drawn on all charts, and on the IFR ones (ERC and TAC) the height limits are in the boxes to avoid cluttering up the charts;
- Restricted Area briefing on NAIPS.

To see whether they're active, the best source is the Restricted Area Briefing on NAIPS (NAIPS hasn't caught up and changed it to SUA Briefing yet). Log in, go to Restricted Area Briefing, and enter Briefing Area/s (eg. 60), Restricted Area/s (eg. R156, R162) or Airspace Group (eg. PEX, which will show you all the Pearce airspace). You also need to put in Briefing Period for however many hours ahead you want to see.

The example below shows a bit of everything. It's Area 22, which is western NSW, for a 24-hour period in early May, and it contains:

- R363 – military, marked in red so it's active for all 24 hours, surface to 2000 ft, RA3 so snowflake's chance of a clearance;
- R368 – military, surface to 2200 ft, marked green so it was deactivated for the 24-hour period, RA2;
- R409A – firing range, surface to 3000 ft, marked yellow so it's active at set times as shown in ERSA SUA unless NOTAMs say otherwise, RA2;
- R639A – military flying, 10000 ft to FL600, marked green then red so it was deactivated for the first part of the 24-hour period, then it became active at 2405060000 (10-digit time group, 06 May 2024.) RA2, so you may get a clearance depending on what's happening and how nicely you ask, and there's a link to the relevant NOTAM.

Name	Activity	Status	Start	End	Lower	Upper	NOTAM	Comments
R363	MILITARY NON-FLYING		H24		SFC	2000 FT AMSL		RA 3 - Do not plan when active
R368	MILITARY NON-FLYING		NOTAM		SFC	2200 FT AMSL		RA 2 - See Supplementary Info
R408	AIR DISPLAYS		NOTAM		SFC	5000 FT AMSL		RA 2 - See Supplementary Info
R408	MILITARY NON-FLYING		NOTAM		SFC	1900 FT AMSL		RA 3 - Do not plan when active
R409A	SURFACE FIRING RANGE		MON - FRI 2200-0600 (1HR EARLI		SFC	3000 FT AMSL		RA 2 - See Supplementary Info
R409B	SURFACE FIRING RANGE		NOTAM		3000 FT AMSL	6000 FT AMSL		RA 3 - Do not plan when active
R415	MILITARY NON-FLYING		NOTAM		SFC	1900 FT AMSL		RA 3 - Do not plan when active
R524	RADIO TELESCOPE		H24		SFC	2500 FT AMSL		RA 3 - Do not plan when active
R525	RADIO TELESCOPE		H24		SFC	5000 FT AMSL		RA 3 - Do not plan when active
R639A	MILITARY FLYING		2405060000	2405060300	10000 FT AMSL	FL600	AWX C349/2024	RA 2 - See Supplementary Info
R639B	MILITARY FLYING		2405060000	2405060300	10000 FT AMSL	FL600	AWX C349/2024	RA 2 - See Supplementary Info
R639C	MILITARY FLYING		2405060000	2405060300	10000 FT AMSL	FL600	AWX C349/2024	RA 2 - See Supplementary Info
R639D	MILITARY FLYING		2405060000	2405060300	10000 FT AMSL	FL600	AWX C349/2024	RA 2 - See Supplementary Info

You can find all the same details on NOTAMS, but the Restricted Area briefing, with its table and its pretty colours, is much easier than wading through all the non-SUA NOTAMS to find what you want.

Danger Areas

These are not restricted. They're just areas where you need to pay a bit more attention. Good examples are D104A, B and C – the Jandakot training area, up to 6000 ft, and D193 – below R156,

from ground to 4000 ft. They're areas where you don't expect aircraft to be just flying from A to B. You want to be on the lookout for people doing PFL's, aeros, and students in 152's who generally have no idea what they're doing (D104) or in Hawks who know exactly what they're doing at 300 kt and 200 ft (D193).

Military Operating Areas (MOA)

This is a new one. The Chicago Convention (mentioned in my March article) forbids a member state from imposing airspace restrictions on foreign aircraft in international airspace. To get around that technicality, Australia has recently introduced Military Operating Areas (MOA) to cover international airspace used for military activities.

AIC H47/23 – <https://www.airservicesaustralia.com/aip/current/sup/a23-h47.pdf> – describes them as more or less the same as Restricted Areas, and most of them are within Australian airspace, but if they extend into international airspace, foreign aircraft are not restricted by them; it's just strongly recommended that they comply with the airspace requirements. MOA have the same entry requirements as Restricted Areas, but because they're not RA, they don't have RA status. So do you have a chance of getting a clearance through them, as though they're RA1? This appears to still be a bit of a grey area, but my best guess is that since all the areas in WA that are becoming MOA in June were previously RA2, I'd treat them as "Don't expect a clearance."

If it all sounds a bit confusing, take heart from knowing that this is the stuff that allows CASA's lawyers to afford private schools and ski trips to Switzerland!

MOA were introduced over east in November 2023, but as of 13 June, some of the Restricted Areas around Pearce, Stirling and Learmonth will also become MOA. For instance R162, which overlies the Jandakot training area and extends down to Harvey, becomes M161, and the Naval flying and gunnery areas off Stirling are becoming MOA. Same dimensions as before, same lower limit of 6000 ft, and probably the same activation times.

20 years

When I first started instructing at Northam, Robyn Stewart was President, Joy Flegeltaub was Treasurer, PGL shared the hangar with CMP, John Howard was PM, the Athens Olympics were just around the corner, and we'd just bought a 4 × 2 house in Willetton for under \$300,000. That was June 2004. To mark 20 years of me coming up to Northam on weekends, I'm planning to have a get-together at the club on June 22nd. Errol and co. will organise some food and I'll put on a bar tab, so please join us for an evening of food, drink and tall tales! Please RSVP to Errol (0428 880149) or me (0434 000217) by June 14th so we have some idea of numbers for catering.