

10 DIE IN BURNT PLANE

THREE MINISTERS LOSE LIVES

Army Chief Also a Victim

TRAGEDY SHOCKS NATION

CANBERRA, Tuesday.—Three senior Federal Ministers flying to Canberra to attend a Cabinet meeting, General Sir Brudenell White, and six other persons were killed this morning in one of the most tragic plane crashes in Australia's history.

On the point of landing an R.A.A.F. bomber in which they were travelling crashed about two miles from the Canberra aerodrome and burst into flames, incinerating all on board.

Arriving over the aerodrome at about 10.30 a.m., after a two-hour flight from Melbourne, the plane circled preparatory to landing, but watchers believe that the pilot, thinking that he was too high, decided to make another circuit. The plane disappeared beyond the tree-lined ridge of the aerodrome, and shortly afterwards a loud explosion and a cloud of smoke gave the first indication of the tragedy.

As the result of urgent calls made to Air Force officers, fire brigades and ambulances, and policy emergency squads were rushed to the scene. Air Force tenders and police cars were driven rapidly across paddocks, but by the time they arrived the machine was blazing fiercely.

Occupants of the plane could be seen sitting huddled in their seats. The machine was standing in an almost normal position.

As soon as the flames were quelled ambulance men and emergency squads dragged the victims from the wreckage, and an armed Air Force guard was thrown around the scene.

When Group-Captain Murphy and Squadron-Leader Winnecke made a preliminary inspection they were impressed by the fact that within the charred wreckage was a smouldering tree stump. This has given rise to the theory that the plane might have landed on the stump, and that it was this that caused the explosion.

Officials think that the explanation of the crash may be that, with the plane losing height, the engines of the machine cut out and that the pilot endeavoured to make a forced landing after it had gone into a short spin.

The fact that the machine was landed without serious damage before fire broke out suggests that the pilot was manoeuvring to pancake the plane.

Officials who examined the wreckage are certain that it was

scattered over a wide area, but an examination of the ground on this occasion revealed no wreckage except where the fire occurred.

The two engines had been melted into an almost unrecognisable heap of metal.

Among the early arrivals were Mr. Spender (Treasurer), Sir Frederick Stewart (Minister for Supply), and Mr. Thorby (Postmaster-General), who had been awaiting the arrival of their colleagues when news of the tragedy was received.

The plane was pointing "down wind" when the fire broke out, and the westerly wind swept the flames forward from the plane, leaving the tailplane and twin rudders scorched but unburnt.

The victims had been so seriously burned that it was impossible to identify them until the remains were removed to the Canberra mortuary, where various personal belongings gave the police necessary clues to identity.

Important files of official and secret documents relating to the war effort and the international situation were on the plane. They were completely destroyed.

STATE FUNERAL PLANNED

St. Paul's Service

Plans for a State funeral will be discussed at a conference of military heads at Army Headquarters, Victoria Barracks, at 9.30 a.m. today. The train carrying the remains of the victims will arrive at Spencer st. to-morrow morning.

There will be a State procession, with full military and civil honours, from Spencer st. to St. Paul's Cathedral, where a service will be held at 2 p.m. It is expected that



Flight-Lieutenant
R. E. HITCHCOCK



Pilot-Officer R.
WIESENER

AIR CRASH VICTIMS

Victims of the tragic air crash near Canberra were:—

PASSENGERS

LIEUT.-GENERAL SIR CYRIL BRUDENELL WHITE, Chief of the General Staff, aged 63, Melbourne, married, four children.

BRIGADIER GEOFFREY AUSTIN STREET, Army Minister, aged 46, grazier, Lismore (V.), married, two children.

MR. JAMES VALENTINE FAIRBAIRN, Air Minister, aged 43, grazier, Mount Elephant (V.), married, two children.

SIR HENRY GULLETT, Vice-President of Executive Council, aged 62, Toorak, married, two children.

LIEUT.-COLONEL FRANCIS THORNTHWAITE, Army Liaison Officer, General Staff, aged 50, grazier, Derrinalum (V.), married.

MR. RICHARD E. ELFORD, private secretary to Mr. Fairbairn, aged 30, Melbourne, married, two children.

AIR CREW

FLIGHT-LIEUT. R. E. HITCHCOCK, R.A.A.F., aged 28, Agg street, Newport (V.), married, one child.

PILOT-OFFICER R. F. WIESENER, R.A.A.F., aged 29, Ethel st., Burwood (Sydney), married, two children.

CORPORAL J. F. PALMER, R.A.A.F., aged 29, Gardiner parade, Glen Iris (V.), married

ARAVS 14-8-40

CANBERRA AIR CRASH.

INQUIRY ENDS.

Statement by Minister Next Week.

CANBERRA, Thursday.

A statement on the cause of the Canberra air crash on August 13, in which three Federal Ministers, the Chief of the General Staff, and six others were killed, will probably be made next week by the Minister for Air, Mr. Fadden.

The statement will be based on a private report by Mr. Justice Lowe, who concluded an open inquiry into the accident to-day.

Mr. Charles Dean, who appeared to assist Mr. Justice Lowe, in summing up at the inquiry to-day, said that the Court was in the position of having either to adopt the most probable theory of a stalling machine, or deciding that it was unable to say what was the cause of the accident.

Evidence, he said, had dispelled doubts which may have formed in the public mind about the possibility of sabotage, overloading, anyone but a competent and experienced pilot having flown the plane, or suggestions that the plane was not airworthy.

Three views had been given by experts for the cause of the crash. They were an error of judgment by the pilot, the failure of an engine on landing, and that one of the wing flaps was down while the other was up, causing strain. Experts during the secret session of the inquiry, however, had said that there were a number of probable causes.

Reviewing the evidence before the Court, Mr. Dean said that messages received from the plane en route had suggested that no difficulty was experienced by the pilot. The aeroplane, as far as the evidence showed, was in perfect condition. It had been flown to Canberra the week before by a pilot-officer who had nine persons aboard. Although the plane had 10 people aboard when it crashed, it was not overloaded.

"It is necessary to establish what happened to the aeroplane in flight immediately before it crashed, and there the greatest difficulty arises. The Court has heard the testimony of the witnesses, who gave completely varying accounts, probably because of varying degrees of observation and their position in relation to the plane. One of the problems for the Court is to determine which one of the accounts should be accepted.

"It is extremely improbable that the plane made a complete roll.

THREE VIEWS GIVEN.

Mr. Justice Lowe said that three views had been given by experts of the most probable causes. They were an error of judgment by the pilot, the failure of an engine, and that one of the landing flaps may have been down and the other up, bringing about abnormal pressure which created a position of emergency which resulted in the crash.

Mr. Dean said that there was no evidence which would justify the Court in believing that any suggested cause was the cause of the accident. He suggested that such suggestions as sabotage, unairworthiness, overloading, or that some other person was piloting the plane, could be omitted.

It was unthinkable that a skilled pilot would vacate his seat for anybody else and it was human improbability that a man would take upon himself the piloting of the plane when so many lives were involved.

The court was adjourned to a date to be fixed.

SOME DOUBTS DISPELLED

Air Crash Cause

CANBERRA, Thursday.—After the hearing of evidence had been completed to-day in the public inquiry into the cause of the Canberra air tragedy, Mr. Arthur Dean, who is assisting the Court, told Mr. Justice Lowe that the Court had either to accept the most probable theory of a stalling, or come to the conclusion that it was unable to say what caused the Lockheed Hudson bomber to crash.

Mr. Dean was permitted to read extracts from "opinion evidence" of expert witnesses who had been examined in Melbourne in camera. He disclosed that an Air Force officer had admitted that stalling was not an improbable cause of the disaster.

Mr. Justice Lowe said that three theories had been advanced by experts:— (1) A possible error of judgment by the pilot; (2) possible engine failure, and (3) possibility that one of the landing flaps was down and the other up, producing abnormal flight conditions.

In spite of conflicting accounts by eye witnesses, Mr. Dean said in his address, the inquiry had dispelled doubts which might have arisen in the public mind about the possibility of sabotage or overloading, of anybody but a competent and experienced pilot having had charge of the plane, or suggestions that the machine was not airworthy.

Mr. Justice Lowe said that the Court would consider its report. He, therefore, formally adjourned the inquiry to a date to be fixed.

He understood, he said, that two other aircraft of the same type had recently met with misfortune—one at Richmond (N.S.W.) and the other off the Queensland coast. He would like to have before him the evidence of the Service Courts in both cases. There might be some connecting link with the circumstances of the present inquiry.

Flying-Officer G. Pape (for the Air Board) said he thought it would be possible for him to obtain these reports.

WERE BOTH FLAPS DOWN?

Addressing the Court, Mr. Dean said that there was definite evidence that one wing flap was down, and further evidence had suggested that both were down. He found it difficult to accept the unsupported evidence of a witness that one wing was on fire while the plane was in the air. The witness had probably seen sparks or flame coming from the engine exhaust.

Mr. Justice Lowe.—While I accept that evidence as honest, I am not prepared to believe it in view of other evidence.

"I suggest," said Mr. Dean, "that we can omit such suggestions as sabotage, unairworthiness, or overloading, or that some other person was piloting the plane. It is unthinkable that a skilled pilot would vacate his seat for anybody else, and it is improbable that a man would take upon himself the piloting of a plane when so many lives were involved."

Mr. Justice Lowe.—The theory of another pilot is pure speculation in the absence of any evidence from those who perished in the accident.

Mr. Dean said that expert pilots had stated that the accident might have been due to any one of a number of causes.

Mr. Justice Lowe.—I think a suggestion was made that one engine might have failed, but the evidence is so overwhelming against it that I cannot suggest it as a cause.

Thirteen witnesses, including four R.A.A.F. men, were called to-day. No evidence was heard in camera.

Hilton Arthur Clothier, farmer, said he saw flames shooting over the right wing just before the plane struck the ground.

None of the other witnesses, some of whom were recalled for the purpose, corroborated this evidence. They all agreed that no flames were visible until the plane had crashed. Several witnesses said that the plane had rolled over completely with the nose level before diving to the ground. Others gave different versions.

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

29.8.40

STALL BLAMED FOR CRASH

Canberra Tragedy

Probable causes of the Canberra air disaster on August 13 were stalling of the aircraft and consequent loss of control of it by the pilot at a height at which it was beyond his power to recover control, according to the report of Mr. Justice Lowe, Royal Commissioner, presented yesterday to Federal Cabinet.

Ten lives were lost in the crash, the victims being: Brigadier Street, Army Minister; Sir Henry Gullett, Vice-President of Federal Executive Council; Mr. Fairbairn, Air Minister; General Sir Brudenell White, Chief of the General Staff; Lieut.-Colonel F. Thornthwaite; and Mr. R. E. Elford, and the crew of four.

Mr. Justice Lowe reported specifically that the plane, a Hudson aircraft operated by the R.A.A.F., was completely air-worthy and in the hands of a competent pilot; that no unauthorised person interfered with it; that it was adequately guarded; and that it was adequately maintained and inspected.

He also reported that Flight Lieutenant Hitchcock, who was killed in the crash, had been adequately trained and was a competent pilot, and added: "All the evidence before me points to the conclusion that he alone piloted the aircraft on its journey from Essendon to Canberra."

SAFETY FACTORS

The evidence, the report stated, did not enable the Royal Commissioner to say whether any special conditions, such as disturbance of wind due to the configuration of the hills near Canberra aerodrome, was the cause of the stalling which resulted in the crash.

A rider to the report suggested the necessity of impressing on pilots the stalling characteristics of this type of aircraft and the necessity of approaching landing grounds with an ample safety factor of speed.

"This," the rider added, "is a warning which seems particularly advisable where the landing is to be made at an aerodrome surrounded by hills, the presence of which may set up air currents which may affect the equilibrium of the machine and raise the stalling speed."

Another rider to the report suggested that, where exigencies of the service permitted, it was advisable that pilots to be converted to this type of aircraft should have the widest background of experience, and should have had experience of other twin-engined machines.

A third rider suggested the advisability of reconsidering whether the method of retracting flaps was sufficient. It pointed out that the hydraulic power which operated the flaps was transmitted by wire cables attached by a swaged joint to the appropriate fitting, which was different from the attachment in use in the R.A.F. The evidence suggested that it was not so efficient.

The Royal Commission reported that the passengers and crew were killed outright in the crash or in the explosion and fire which immediately succeeded it.

Referring to the delay in the start from Essendon aerodrome, when the machine turned into the wind for four or five minutes before taking off, the report said the delay was described as unusual, but no explanation of it was given. There was evidence that the port engine seemed to take several minutes before it was started. No one was seen to enter or leave the plane during the delay, and it eventually made a perfect take-off.

The machine, according to the report, had been flown for 2 hours 35 minutes when it was handed over to the R.A.A.F., and its total service flying before setting out on the flight to Canberra was seven hours. On a previous flight to Canberra and back it had behaved normally, and no difficulties of any kind were experienced.

PILOT'S EXPERIENCE

Flight-Lieutenant Hitchcock, the pilot, had a total flying time of 1,211 hours 25 minutes, of which 107 hours were in Lockheed types of aircraft. He was described by his commanding officer as a "steady type of officer and a capable pilot," and by the officer who converted him to Hudson aircraft as being "thorough and slightly above average."

Although the aircraft had dual control, and Pilot-Officer R. F. Wiesner was carried as second pilot, Mr. Justice Lowe reported that Flight-Lieutenant Hitchcock alone was capable of navigating the aircraft at all stages of the flight. Pilot-Officer Wiesner, he said, was present merely for instructional purposes.

Mr. Justice Lowe rejected a suggestion that the Hudson plane was on fire before crashing, and reported that it was improbable that the machine rolled on its back before diving to the ground. He also thought it unlikely that the crash occurred through failure of an engine or from some structural defect, or the collapse of the pilot.

THE ARGUS 10.10.40

CANBERRA AIR DISASTER

A16-97

CAUSED BY STALL.

Mr. Justice Lowe's Findings.

MELBOURNE, Wednesday.

The probable cause of the Canberra air disaster on August 13 was the stalling of the aircraft and consequent loss of control by the pilot at a height at which it was beyond his power to recover control, according to the report of the Royal Commissioner, Mr. Justice Lowe, which was presented to-day to the Federal Cabinet.

He found that Flight-Lieutenant Hitchcock, who was in charge of the plane, was an adequately trained and competent pilot, and that the R.A.A.F. Lockheed Hudson was completely air-worthy.

Mr. Justice Lowe said it was advisable that pilots to be placed in charge of this type of aircraft should have the widest background of experience, including that of other twin-engined machines.

Ten persons, including the Cabinet Ministers and the Chief of the General Staff, were killed in the crash.

STALLING CHARACTERISTICS.

Mr. Justice Lowe reported that no unauthorised person interfered with the plane; that it was adequately guarded, and that it was adequately maintained and inspected.

"All the evidence before me," he said, "points to the conclusion that Flight-Lieutenant Hitchcock alone piloted the aircraft on its journey from Essendon to Canberra."

The evidence, the report stated, did not enable the Royal Commissioner to say whether any special conditions, such as disturbance of wind due to the configuration of the hills near Canberra, was the cause of the stalling which resulted in the crash.

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"This," the rider added, "is a warning which seems particularly advisable where the landing is to be made at an aerodrome surrounded by hills, the presence of which may set up air currents which may affect the equilibrium of the machine and raise the stalling speed."

RETRACTING FLAPS.

Another rider suggested the advisability of considering whether the method of retracting flaps was sufficient. It pointed out that the hydraulic power which operated the flaps was transmitted by wire cables, attached by a swaged joint to the appropriate fitting, which was different from the attachment in use in the R.A.A.F. The evidence suggested that it was not so efficient.

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PILOT ABOVE AVERAGE.

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