

A19-139

Airmen found after 52 years

THE wreckage of a RAAF Beaufighter and the remains of its two Australian crewmen have been found in Papua New Guinea — 52 years after they crashed.

The two crewmen have been identified as pilot flying officer John Coates, of Lake Boga, Victoria, and wireless air gunner,

flying officer Charles Hilton Chapple, of Greenthorpe, New South Wales.

RAAF spokesman Ken Llewellyn said the pair disappeared on November 25, 1943, as they flew a low level offensive sweep with another aircraft against Japanese coastal barge traffic. There was no doubt they had

crashed and little doubt they had been killed.

A French survey team found the wreckage on the island of New Britain and reported it to Australian authorities.

RAAF flight lieutenant John Coughlan said the dog tags of both men had been found and their identity confirmed by a forensic dentist.

- AAP

HERALD SUN P. 11 THURS 16.11.95

Comrades in arms to the end

By TERRY BROWN

TWO RAAF airmen shot down during low level raids in Papua New Guinea will be buried together, comrades in arms.

Their bodies were found with the wreckage of their Beaufighter about two weeks ago, almost 52 years after it was downed in thick jungle 300km south of New Britain.

Percy Coates, 26, the Victorian pilot, was a carpenter around Lake Boga before joining up. He had been married less than a year.

His unmarried gunner Hilton Chapple, 21, came off a farm at Greenthorpe



Percy Coates

in central NSW, where he grew up, the second of three children.

Mr Chapple's younger brother Jack said yesterday the find had revived painful memories of losing a "minder" and hero.

"But after that came a



Hilton Chapple

feeling of relief that at last we knew his destiny." Mr Chapple said from the farm where they grew up.

"We didn't know if he survived and was taken prisoner or whether he died in the jungle. We now know the end came

quickly." Mr Chapple, 63, said being 10 years younger than Hilton, he worshipped him as little brothers do. He will attend the service.

Flying Officer Coates' widow is too ill to attend.

RAAF Flt-Lt John Coughlan said yesterday the airmen's remains would be buried in the same coffin with full military honors tomorrow week at Bita Paka war cemetery near Rabaul — the 52nd anniversary of their deaths.

"They died as comrades in arms and will be buried as comrades in arms," he said.

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THE COURIER-MAIL — 3

Jungle gives up missing airmen

By CHARLES MIRANDA in Canberra

THE bodies of two World War II Australian airmen have been found in jungle on an island east of Papua New Guinea.

Pilot flying officer Percy Coates and wireless air gunner Charles Chapple were still strapped into their seats in their Beaufighter when found by a French survey team.

The team had been surveying for minerals and oils on the dense jungle island of New Britain east of Madang when it stumbled across the plane.

The find was reported to the Australian High Commission in PNG and a Royal Australian Air Force recovery team was sent to inspect

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Coates, 26, from Victoria, and Chapple, 21, from Greenthorpe, NSW, had been on a routine mission, looking for Japanese barges which were moving troops and equipment.

An accompanying allied fighter saw their plane shot down by ground fire.

Coates had been married only a few weeks.

The men had been operating their 30 Squadron Beaufighter from Kiriwina Island, 445km east of Port Moresby.

RAAF spokesman Ken Llewellyn said a lot of luck had been involved in the find, but hundreds of allied crashes were still unresolved.

"Many relatives still have queries in their minds about what happened to loved ones: and by making finds such as this we lay memories to rest."

The men's relatives — including Chapple's brother and Coates's sister — will fly to PNG to attend a funeral service at Bika Paka War Cemetery near Rabaul.

Missing for 52 years

The bodies of two Australian pilots who went missing in action in Papua New Guinea during World War II, were recently discovered in a remote Papua New Guinean jungle. Last weekend their families finally attended their joint funeral. LUCY PALMER, AAP Correspondent in PNG, reports.

RABAUL — For 52 years, no one knew the fate of RAAF pilot Percy Coates and gunner Hilton Chapple after their plane disappeared into the thick jungles of New Britain, just north of inland Papua New Guinea, in November 1943.

Last weekend, a few kilometres from the volcano-devastated town of Rabaul, capital of New Britain, the remains of two 30 Squadron air crew were finally laid to rest, buried together in a simple wooden coffin.

They came from different places, with a common duty. They were thrown together and in operation they died together. Today we come to lay them to rest, together," RAAF Captain Rod Acreman told the congregation.

Eight Officers Percy Coates, from Lake Boga, Victoria, and Hilton Chapple, 21, of Greenethorpe, New South Wales, had been on an early morning mission run in their powerful engine-engined Beaufighter, nicknamed "Whispering Death".

Their job was to strafe Japanese coastal positions as part of a strategy to break the enemy's supply lines and their stranglehold on north-western PNG.

Returning home, the men were hit by light enemy fire, their plane struck a tree on a ridge

and tumbled into the gully below.

The wreckage, and the remains, stayed untouched until early October this year when three Australians, living and working locally, heard about the wreckage from a Papua New Guinean oil palm plantation worker, and decided to go and investigate.

A short helicopter ride inland from the coastal town of Kimbe and a punishing hour-long walk through the bush brought forestry worker Brian Bennett and two friends to a small jungle clearing.

"The tail had broken off but the rest of the plane was quite intact. We were only there a few minutes when it was apparent there were human remains, some long bones, some portions of skull, a piece of boot," Mr Bennett told AAP. "It was a bit awesome."

Mr Bennett travelled to the funeral at Bitapaka War Cemetery near Rabaul last Saturday to meet with the families after an official RAAF investigation had confirmed their identities.

Hilton Chapple's brother Jack was only 11 years old when a postman cycled to their father on their family sheep property in Greenethorpe, near Cowra NSW, and told him his 21-year-old son was missing in action.

"I remember that moment quite vividly, it was absolute devastation," recalled Jack, standing in the picturesque cemetery, which, along with Lae and Port Moresby Commonwealth war cemeteries, commemorate the deaths of almost 8000 Australians who died in the PNG campaign.

A series of memorial plaques at Bitapaka alone is dedicated to more than 1200 Australian war dead with no known graves.

"My brother was the hero of our family. He always put 100% into everything and I'm sure he would have done it in that operation too," he said.

For the Victorian-based family of Percy Coates, the RAAF-sponsored pilgrimage to Bitapaka brought relief as well as sadness.

"It's been very emotional, after so many years of wondering where they are, and now we know they are here in this beautiful place," said his younger sister, Dorothy Coates.

She said the family had been tantalised by rumours that Percy was still alive in the years following his disappearance, with one story even claiming he had been taken as a Prisoner of War.

"It's a relief to know he did not suffer at the hands of the Japanese," she said.

Less comforting news was the discovery that a PNG forestry survey team had found the plane 10 years ago, but had not reported it to authorities.

"My experience has been that people tend to get frightened with things like that because of the possibility of unexploded ordnance and also the fact that it was a gravesite, people may be superstitious," Brian Bennett said.

The RAAF believes there are hundreds of Allied aircraft still buried deep in the jungles of the south-west Pacific, despite already having recorded 4956 deaths in the region up to August 1945.

Searches would continue to take place on the basis of reliable sightings.

"We go out of our way to ensure the crews of these aircraft are interred with appropriate ceremony," the RAAF said.

Jack Chapple said the service filled him with sadness and pride, but had healed the "empty feeling" he had carried with him for more than half a century.

"Even planes getting lost in the Blue Mountains, it can take years to find them," he said.

"This terrain is so mountainous and so heavily covered with forest, it's miraculous they were ever discovered at all."

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RAAF crew's bodies found in PNG

By MAX BLENKIN

The wreckage of a RAAF Beaufighter and the remains of its two Australian crewmen have been found in Papua New Guinea, 52 years after they crashed.

The two crewmen have been identified as Pilot Flying Officer John Coates, of Lake Boga, Victoria, and Flying Officer Charles Hilton Chapple, of Greenthorpe, NSW, who was the wireless operator/air gunner.

RAAF spokesman Ken Llewellyn said the pair disappeared on November 25, 1943, as their plane made a low-level offensive sweep with another plane against Japanese coastal barge traffic.

There was no doubt they had crashed into the thick jungle and there was little doubt they had been killed, but exactly where remained a mystery.

A French survey team came across the wreckage of the aircraft on the island of New Britain and reported the find to Australian authorities.

RAAF Flight Lieutenant John Coughlan said yesterday one of the surveyors was an aircraft enthusiast who was able to find the plane's identification number. That and the location of the wreckage meant the RAAF was almost certain of the identity of the plane and its crew even before a RAAF team arrived at the site.

Flight Lieutenant Coughlan, who will escort a small group of the men's relatives to their funeral at the Bita Paka war cemetery near Rabaul, said they were members of 30 Squadron based on Kiriwina Island.

At that time, New Britain was firmly in Japanese hands. The men's plane had flown with another Beaufighter on what was a routine sweep against Japanese coastal shipping.

Moments before the crash, Flying Officer Coates radioed to the other aircraft that he was experiencing engine trouble, possibly as a result of Japanese anti-aircraft fire. The aircraft flipped over and crashed into the thick jungle canopy which concealed the wreckage from subsequent searches, until now.

He said the RAAF had been able to find a number of relatives including one man's widow, who was unfortunately not well enough to travel to the funeral service.

The funeral will be held on November 25 — 52 years to the day since the men disappeared.

— AAP

Missing for 52

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