

**A**T Maroochydore yesterday, death struck from the sky and three children were killed, and 14 other people injured, in an appalling beach tragedy.

An antiquated R.A.A.F. Wirraway, being used as a shark patrol, crashed into the crowd of about 2000 people on the beach, causing the worst New Year's Eve holiday holocaust in the Queensland coast's history.

The spectacle on Maroochydore beach near the club-house, at 11.5 a.m. was one which seared itself permanently into the memory of the horrified spectators unfortunate enough to witness it.

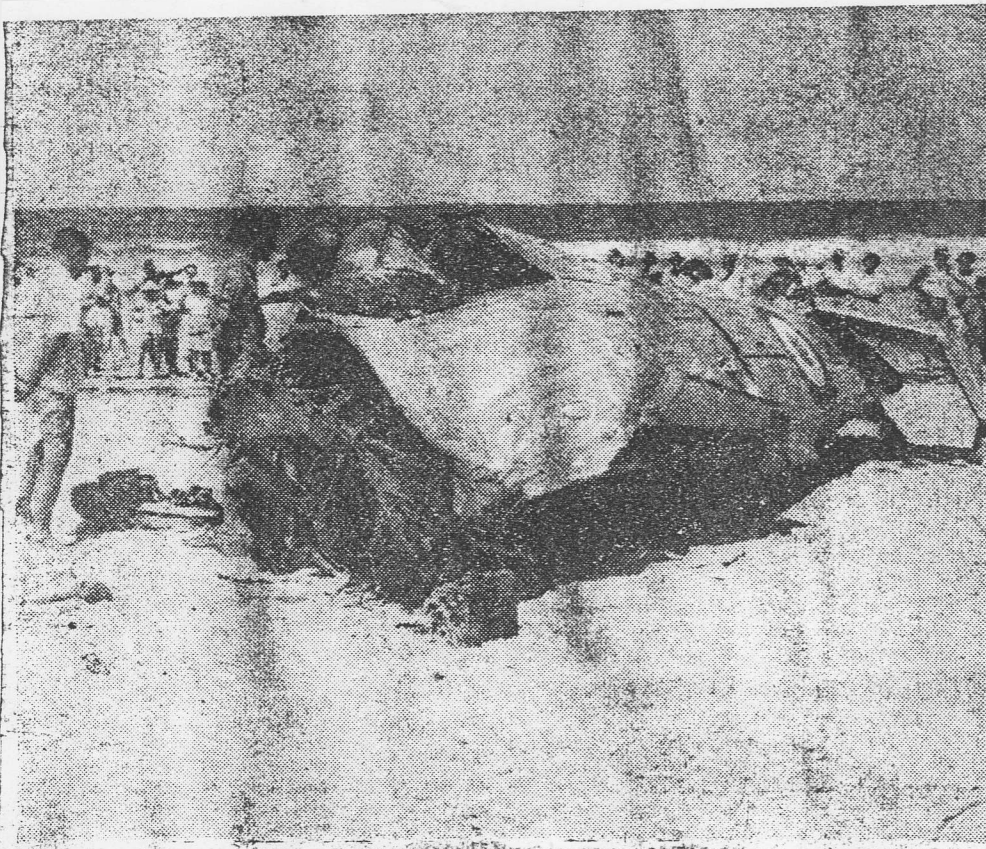
The 'plane, at the time, was on a routine shark patrol flight. The beach was crowded. Police estimate there were nearly 2000 people on the beach, in the water, or promenading on the rises behind the beach. It was the peak of the morning's surfing activity.

After circling six or seven times, to draw attention to what was thought to be a shark just beyond the first line of breakers, the Wirraway's pilot was apparently startled to find the right wing of his 'plane dangerously close to the lifesavers' watchtower—less than 6 feet from it!

He frantically veered the machine to the left, but by then the 'plane's height was less than 30 feet. Onlookers stood petrified with horror as the Wirraway struck a sandbank, heaved, bounced 40 feet and, with a thunderous roar, a series of earsplitting detonations, and a shuddersome ripping sound, crashed into the back outskirts of the crowd.

The scene as the 'plane, ploughing up clouds of sand and spitting hot oil, literally disintegrated, was poignant and shocking beyond description. Screams of the maimed and shouts of those who thought they were in the 'plane's path were deafening. Eye-witnesses told "Truth" later it was a miracle that scores more people were not killed or maimed. One eye-witness said that, in his estimation, the 'plane made about seven circuits, each time coming in towards the crowd at a lower altitude. Many people on the beach were convinced that a wing of the 'plane actually struck the look-out tower, before veering off in its final dive, but subsequent police investigations do not bear this out. Subsequently, it was determined, also, that what the pilot of the Wirraway had thought was a shark was, actually, a large fish.

30.12.50

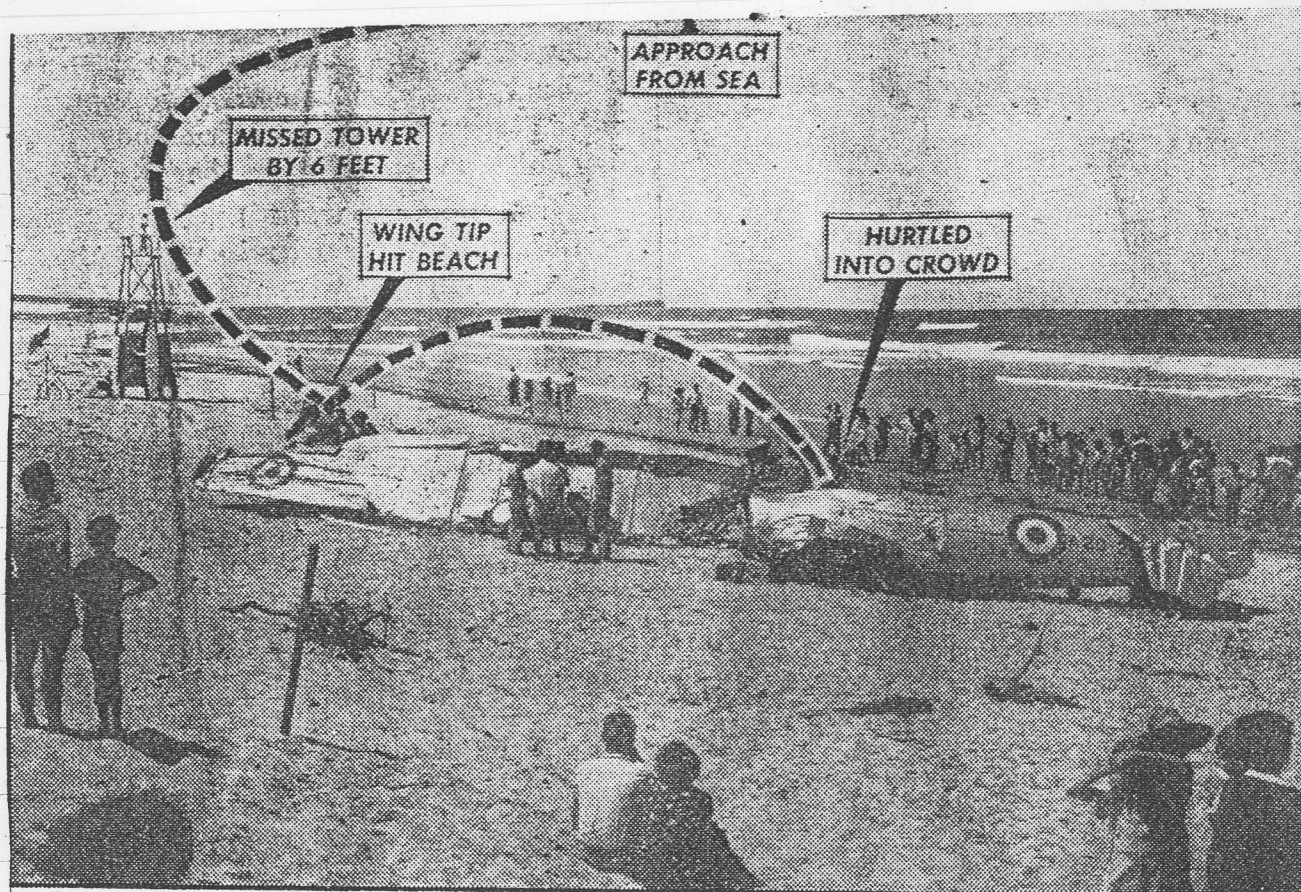


**3 dead  
14 hurt**

30.12.50

Here are pictures of the wreckage of the R.A.A.F. shark patrol plane which crashed into a crowd on Maroochydore main beach today.





**WRECKAGE** of the R.A.A.F. shark patrol Wirraway plane lies in the foreground of this picture, taken soon after the tragedy at Maroochydore. Dotted line indicates the approximate course of the machine before it hurtled into the crowd. **LEFT:** Close-up of the wrecked fuselage of the R.A.A.F. plane after crash. In the foreground is the bulkhead from which the engine was torn in the crash.





**PORTION** of the R.A.A.F. plane's wing, covering the engine, was torn from the fuselage in the crash.



WRECK of the Wirraway on the Maroochydore beach 40 years ago.

Forty years ago this weekend, an RAAF Wirraway flying a Sunshine Coast shark patrol slammed into a crowded beach, killing three people and seriously injuring a dozen others.

**John Wright** spoke this week to some of the survivors.

**B**ERYL Zanuttini has never confessed to being religious. She doesn't put too much faith in fate, either, or what it might have in store for her.

What happened to her, she says, was luck, that's all.

Bad luck that it happened. Good luck that she cheated death when it came stalking her, in a place it had no right to be, on a hot Maroochydore morning 40 years ago.

She was Mrs Vince Borca then, the 32-year-old wife of an Innisfail publican. They and their daughter Cheryl, 4, were holidaying on the Sunshine Coast with other family members over the Christmas-New Year break, 1950.

They were not planning to return north because they were on their way to Toowoomba to take over a pub there. What happened at 11.20am on Saturday, December 30, put paid to those plans, for good.

At 9.45 that morning, as the women and children of Mrs Borca's family were gathering towels at her parents' home for a day at the beach, a two-seater RAAF Wirraway took off from Archerfield aerodrome in Brisbane.

# Death came from the skies

Its pilot, Flight-Lt Herbert Thwaites, 27, an instructor with 3000 hours' flying time to his credit, was one of the most experienced pilots in the RAAF's 23 (City of Brisbane) Squadron. His crew was Sgt Jeffery Neill, 38.

Their shark patrol flying orders were governed by strict regulations framed by the Civil Aviation Department and the Royal Queensland Aero Club.

Their flight along Brisbane's northern beaches was uneventful. The sky was clear, the water below the Wirraway calm and sparkling. It was a hot morning and Sunshine Coast lifesavers were expecting big crowds.

An estimated 700 people were

forming holiday safety initiative, and as soon as the plane reached Alexandra Headland, Thwaites and Neill saw they had work to do.

A large shark appeared to be threatening a group of surfers outside the patrolled area between the headland and Maroochydore beach. Those in the water had to be alerted.

According to eyewitnesses and police reports of what happened on Maroochydore beach that morning, the Wirraway flew a series of tight, ever-descending circles, each time sweeping down the beach from the north and out to sea again, apparently to warn swimmers about the shark.

With each pass, sunbathers

she recalled this week. "There were seven or eight of us sitting on the beach enjoying the sunshine. Then the shark plane came around.

"He must have come around over the beach about five times, each time lower than the last. It was quite disturbing. We thought he (the pilot) must have been skylarking.

"I had my back to the plane when he came over for the last time. My sister Jean said, 'Oh boy, he's going to crash'. I looked around and I saw it was going to crash. I saw it breaking up on the sand . . . the big part of the motor and parts of the plane were bouncing towards us.

"I must have dived for the



**BERYL Zanuttini . . . lucky to survive.**

"I looked over to Jean and asked her where Cheryl was and Jean said she was okay. Then I told them to put some towels around me because I knew I had to stop the bleeding. I was lucky not to have a broken back.

"I was covered in sand, but I could see my left leg was broken and that most of my right foot was cut off. They had to amputate the rest later.

"I was lucky enough to be taken up to the lifesavers' shed and cared for there. They put me in the back of a truck later and took me to Nambour Hospital. I was lucky there, too, because I have a rare blood group and the Red Cross had collected some of my group in Nambour just a few days before."

Mrs Borca spent nine months in hospital and eventually received compensation for her shocking injuries. For the past 40 years, during which she has been twice widowed, Mrs Zanuttini has walked only with the aid of crutches.

Others on Maroochydore beach that fateful morning were not as lucky. On its final pass over the beach, the Wirraway reportedly banked sharply — perhaps to avoid a 10m shark tower on the beach — and cartwheeled into the crowd after its right wingtip struck the sand.

Lifesavers said many on the beach saw the crash coming and panicked, screaming and running blindly to escape the wreckage as it plunged into them. Dozens threw themselves face down on the sand, some of the adults protecting their children with their own bodies.

Thwaites and Neill survived the crash although Thwaites was seriously injured. Three children were killed and 10 people seriously injured, including Mrs Zanuttini. Many had narrow escapes.

Mrs Zanuttini's nephew, current Surfers Paradise SLSC president Shane O'Connor, was on the beach with her and his

he said. "The plane flew over the beach a few times quite low — low enough to be scary. The next thing it came over very low.

"The wheels appeared to clip the top of the shark tower on the beach and it came down. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. We were quite a long way south of the tower and the plane was coming from the north.

"It bounced about 20m in front of us. I saw the wing hit a boy who was down near the water. I think he was one of those who were killed.

"My mother grabbed me and rolled on top of me to protect me. When she rolled off again, I saw the nail on the little finger of my left hand was missing. I saw my aunt had suffered horrendous injuries from the propellor blade . . . she'd lost one of her feet.

"Mum picked me up, ran down to the water and threw me in the surf. We were covered in oil at the time, and I think mum must have thought the oil was going to burn me. Then she ran back to help my aunt.

"Aunt Beryl was a very brave lady. She was a trained nursing sister and she was aware that there probably wasn't much chance for her because of her rare blood group and the amount of blood she was losing. She told those around her to help the other injured people."

Another boy, Barrie Thorne, 6, was building sand castles on the beach with a young friend who was killed but escaped injury himself because he went for a swim moments before the Wirraway crashed.

"I think it was a touch of fate," said Thorne this week. "It was such a hot day . . . that's why I went into the water.

"The plane hit while I was swimming. I came out of the water covered in oil and petrol. Mum and dad came running down to pick me up. They thought I was gone.

"There were bodies all over