

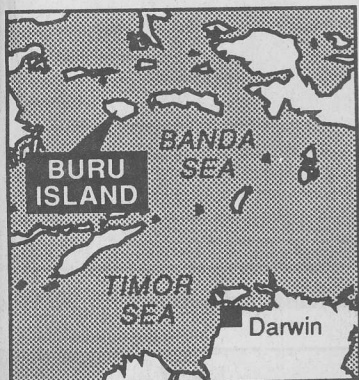
Nine wartime airmen find a final resting

By KAREN MIDDLETON,
diplomatic correspondent

The relatives of nine airmen whose bodies were found 50 years after they disappeared on a bombing mission in Asia in 1944 will be flown to Indonesia next month to attend a funeral with full military honors.

The Royal Australian Air Force plans to arrange a Hercules to fly the families of the nine servicemen to Ambon in the Banda Sea to hold a special service at the war cemetery and end their half-century of uncertainty.

The Indonesian Government officially handed over the bodies of the men, three of whom had been Victorians, to Australian military officials in a ceremony in Indonesia yesterday.



A 12-member defence team recently recovered them from Buru Island, north of Timor, after trekking for two days through rugged rainforest and carefully exploding the aircraft's volatile undelivered cargo.

The men and their Catalina aircraft vanished in July 1944 after they left Darwin with another plane to bomb Namlea, on Buru Island. The other aircraft turned back because of bad weather but the Catalina went on and became one of the many to vanish during World War II.

Its crew was officially missing in action until December last year when two island woodcutters, defying the local animist superstition that the region was haunted, stumbled upon the wreckage in mountainous terrain.

Word eventually reached Australia, where the remaining relatives were notified early this year.

One member of the recovery team, Flying Officer Phil Smith,



Indonesian officials examine the wreckage of the RAAF bomber, which vanished in 1944.

said yesterday from Darwin that he and his colleagues had taken the attitude that they were "just going to collect some bones" until they visited the Ambon cemetery on the way.

There they saw the graves of 600 Commonwealth service-people, some of whose headstones were inscribed with identities "known only to God". It suddenly became "a personal thing" to retrieve the men's bodies and lay them to rest.

The team also included bomb disposal experts and a forensic scientist, Wing Commander Dr

Chris Griffith, who identified the remains from dental charts.

Flying Officer Smith said the Catalina had apparently been hit by ground fire and, having failed to drop its cargo of bombs, had been unable to clear the mountain ahead. Dr Griffiths believed the men died on impact.

The aircraft's 25-year-old co-pilot, Flying Officer Ralph "Pat" Harsley, was among those who died. His stepmother, Mrs Lorna Harsley, said yesterday that he had been a pilot for about a year before the crash, flying Catalinas between Australia and the United States.

She recalled that he was not supposed to be on the ill-fated flight out of Darwin, but had replaced another airman who had to return urgently to Victoria. An air force telegram and a few of his medals were all that came home.

Pat Harsley's grieving fiancée and family never held a funeral service and never knew what really happened.

"It was dreadful at the time," 85-year-old Mrs Harsley said yesterday. "It's so long ago now. I'm sort of glad that the wreckage has been found. We thought it had gone down in the Banda Sea ... I'm really pleased that we finally know."



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Flying Officer Harsley, co-pilot of the ill-fated Catalina.

RAAF uncertain on crash cause

A 50-year-old wartime mystery has been resolved with the discovery of an RAAF aircraft which was apparently shot down by the Japanese over an Indonesia island during World War II.

A crew of nine died when the twin-engined Catalina plane crashed in thick jungle on the island of Buru on July 20, 1944.

The plane was located by wood-gatherers last December and some wreckage and remains of crew members recovered last month by a joint Australian-Indonesian expedition.

RAAF Group Captain Bob Anderson, who was part of the expedition, said yesterday that finding

the plane had been a moving experience. "I'm sure any pilot would feel deep regret and sorrow at seeing the disintegration of the aircraft and of course the loss of life of the crew on board," he said.

"We were able to establish that the nine crew were on board the aircraft at the time [of the crash]."

Captain Anderson said there was no conclusive evidence on what caused the crash, but he said the wreckage was riddled with bullet holes.

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Mains of wartime RAAF crew recovered on island

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WALTERS in Jakarta

Leonard Blackwell, flight sergeant George Neate, flight sergeant Jack Storer, sergeant Reginald Wheatland, flight sergeant Harold Coggin, acting sergeant Ronald Robinson and air gunner Adam Thomson.

A 14-man team consisting of 11 Australians including bomb disposal experts, a forensic scientist and three Indonesian armed forces personnel spent nearly three days at the crash site near the summit of a 2000m mountain on the island.

The RAAF Catalina, A24-45, went down in bad weather on the night of July 20, 1944 while on a long-range strike against Japanese shipping moored in Namlea harbour on Buru Island. The wreckage of the twin-

engine aircraft was discovered last December by Buru Islanders foraging for timber.

The RAAF's Catalina squadrons operating out of Australia's northern ports regularly carried out some of the most secret and daring long-range missions of World War II. They would fly up to 24 hours on single missions to lay highly sophisticated acoustic mines, and to bomb and torpedo enemy shipping.

Speaking by telephone from Ambon yesterday, the leader of the Australian party, Group Captain Bob Anderson, said the team had climbed for two days in extremely rugged terrain made more difficult by mud and incessant rain.

The conditions were so tough that one of the Australian party had to be carried down by local villagers and evacuated to Darwin.

At the fog-shrouded crash site, the team found the Catalina had broken into six or seven major pieces with wreckage spread over 100sqm. The front part of the fuselage had been burnt, with two of the 250kg bombs on board believed to have exploded after impact.

"We did find a considerable number of bullet holes in the wings and fuselage. My own theory is that they may have taken a few hits after they descended into Namlea harbour," Group Captain Anderson said. "Then they would have done a 180-

degree turn to climb out of the bay but the Catalina simply could not outclimb the mountain. The aircraft was heading in a southerly direction and obviously hit the ground at some speed."

Group Captain Anderson said the Australians had received a rapturous reception from the isolated coastal village of Walmorat, the closest inhabited area.

"They were extraordinarily welcoming and hospitable. The local chief said they had not seen any white faces in the area since 1945. The village provided us with 25 porters to help transport our equipment up the mountain," he said.

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Remains of wartime RAAF crew reco

Australian

By PATRICK WALTERS in Jakarta

THE remains of nine Australians who died in a RAAF Catalina crash 50 years ago on remote Buru Island in eastern Indonesia have been recovered by a joint Australian-Indonesian defence party.

They will be handed over by the Indonesian armed forces to the head of the Australian embassy's defence staff, Brigadier Kerry Mellor, at a ceremony on Ambon Island today.

The remains of the nine RAAF personnel will be buried in the Australian war cemetery at Tantai in Ambon in a special service likely to be held next month.

The Catalina's crew consisted of flying officer Tom Temperley, flying officer Ralph Harsley, pilot officer

Leonard Blackwell, flight sergeant George Neate, flight sergeant Jack Storer, sergeant Reginald Wheatland, flight sergeant Harold Coggin, acting sergeant Ronald Robinson and air gunner Adam Thomson.

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The RAAF's Catalina squadrons operating out of Australia's northern ports regularly carried out some of the most secret and daring long-range missions of World War II. They would fly up to 24 hours on single missions to lay highly sophisticated acoustic mines, and to bomb and torpedo enemy shipping.

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