

A moving memorial



LEFT: Gordon Neilson (left) and Frank Hamilton members of the search crew which found the Beaufort Bomber, at last week's memorial service.

BELOW: The plaque which was unveiled at the ceremony.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PROSHOTS.



MORE than 200 people attended a memorial service on Friday November 17, for the crew members of the RAAF Beaufort Bomber which crashed on Mt Tawonga on June 4, 1945.

The four young men who died in the tragedy were Flying Officer Donald Flavel, the pilot and captain, Flying Officer Robert Clayton, the navigator, Flying Officer Frederick Wallace and Flight Sergeant L J Sims, who were wireless operators/airgunners.

The service, held in beautiful surroundings on the banks of the Kiewa River at the

By Margaret Smith

Mongan's Bridge Caravan Park, was organised by members of the Mount Beauty RSL Sub Branch, as part of the 1995 "Australia Remembers" program.

Greg Peers, Mount Beauty RSL president, welcomed all

the guests, who included Lou Lieberman MHR, Alpine Shire commissioner Angie Rigoni, RSL 35th District Board president Rex Chamberlain, Air Commodore (Retired) Keith Parsons, representatives from the East

Sale RAAF base, and members of the Beaufort Bomber Association.

Also present were Frank (Dick) Hamilton, now of Wangaratta, and Gordon Neilson of Mitta, who were members of the search crew which found the wreckage of the aircraft, and Mary Gower, who was a 12 year old student at the Eskdale school at the time of the tragedy.

Flight Lieutenant Tad Golian, from the 32 Squadron at East Sale, was the guest speaker at the service.

In recounting the events which led to the crash, Flt Lt Golian said

three Beaufort Bombers left Mount Gambier on the evening of June 4, 1945, on a night training flight to the East Sale base. They were blown off course when they encountered bad weather.

Instructions from Sale and bearings from radio beacons made no sense and the plane and its crew were lost in the dark, in bad weather and with low fuel supplies, and eventual plummeted into Mt Tawonga.

After five days of unsuccessful searching, the search was abandoned. Eight weeks later, members of the family of Flying Officer Wallis instigated another search.

Plaque to mark crew's last flight

By
CATHERINE CHISHOLM

UNDERNEATH the dense forest canopy of Mt Tawonga, near Dederang, lies the scattered remains of the Beaufort bomber which crashed there 50 years ago.

The four crew of Royal Australian Air Force Beaufort A9-228 left Mt Gambier at 5.30pm bound for a training site at East Sale, Victoria, but disappeared.

Their plane wandered off course and crashed, burying them in the rugged and almost inaccessible slopes of 4161ft Mt Tawonga.

On November 17 a plaque, organised by the City of Wodonga and the RSL will mark the site, still littered with debris.

A ceremony organised by the Mt Beauty Returned and Services League sub-branch, with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, will be attended by the RAAF, the Beaufort Bomber Association, and relatives of the dead.

It will start at Mongans Bridge at 11am and at then a small group will make the hour-long trek to the site for prayers and a wreath-laying.

"To a degree it is almost a war grave," the president of the RSL sub-branch, Mr Greg Peers, said.

He hopes 200 people will be there for the unveiling of the plaque and dedication to Flying Officer Donald Flavel, the pilot, Flying Officer Robert Clayton, Flying Officer Fredrick Wallis and air gunner, Flight Sgt L.J. Sims.

Mr Peers hopes relatives of the crew and members of the public will attend the ceremony



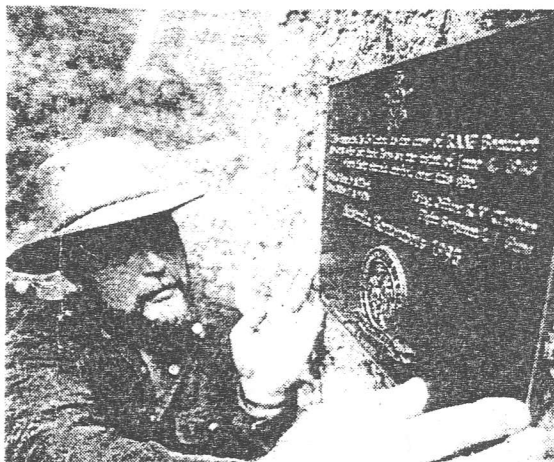
● Greg Peers — the Beaufort bomber's crash site is almost a war grave.

The Eskdale voluntary defence force, led by Mr Frank Hamilton, found the wreck on June 4, 1945.

Mr Hamilton, now of Glenrowan, co-ordinated a search after Fredrick Wallis' brothers and cousin begged them not to give up — eight weeks after the crash.

Mr Hamilton said the plane was completely destroyed with metal scattered for 200 yards.

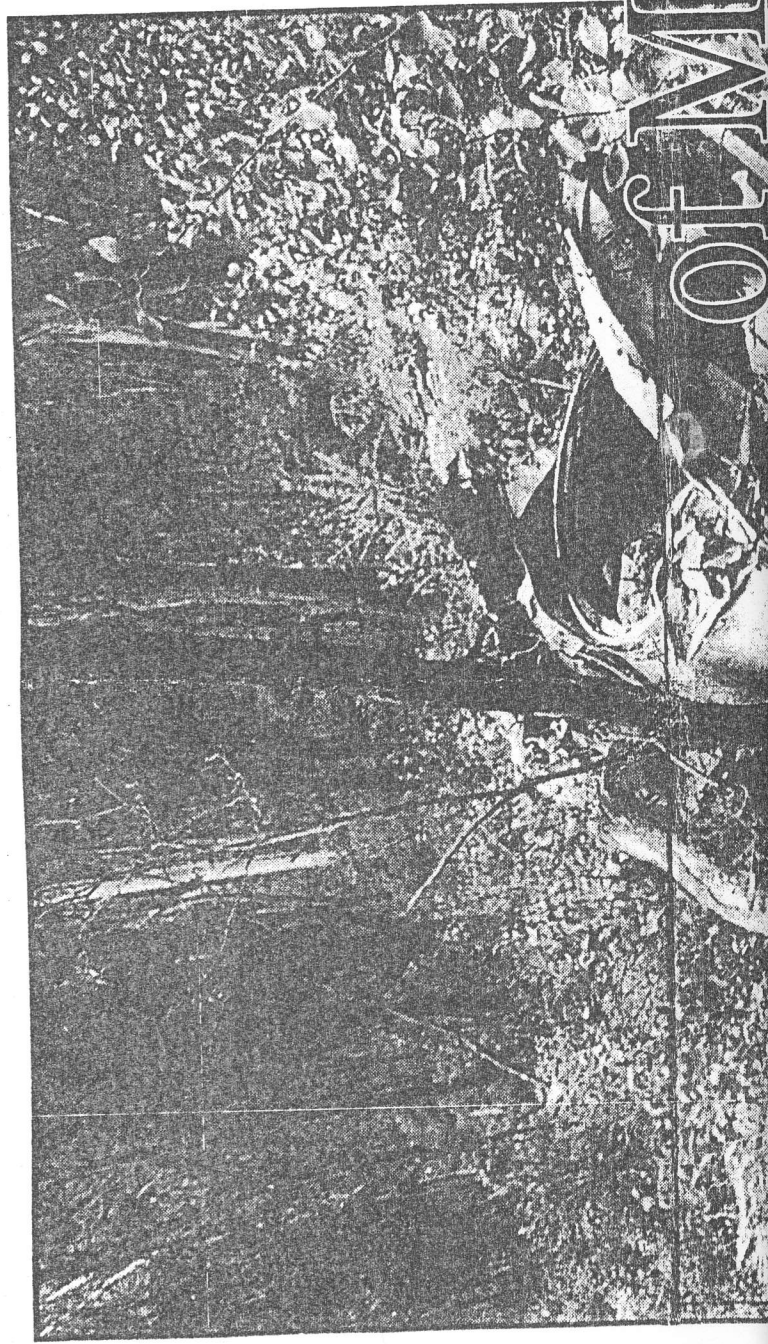
"They would have gone in at full throttle.





● Twisted aluminium from the wreckage of a Beaufort bomber still lays strewn around the crash site on the slopes of Mt Tawonga, 50 years after its crash. Author **DAVID M. GREEN** reports on the tragedy — next page. (Mr Green is seeking photographs taken soon after the crash, or relics from the crash site, to illustrate an account to be published in an English military journal. He may be contacted at Post Office Box 808, Kew, Victoria, 3101.

Tragedy on the slopes of Mt Tawonga





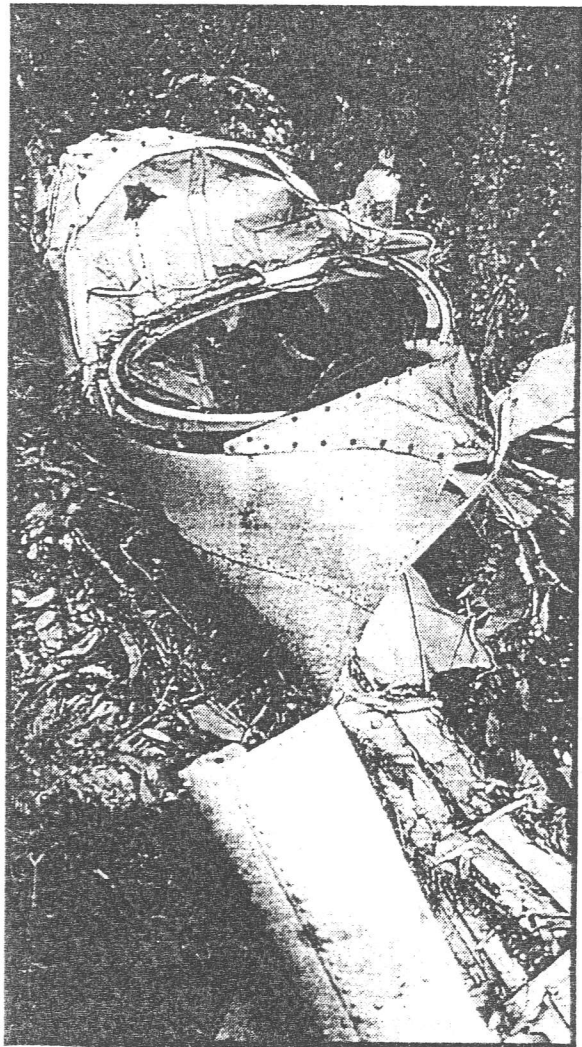
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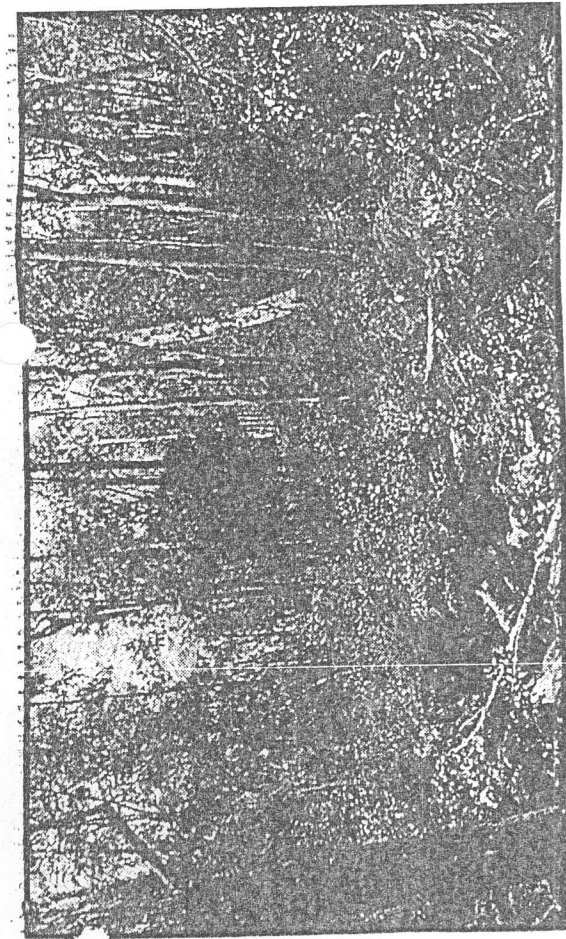
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Tragedy on the slopes of Mt Tawonga





● *Main picture: Author David Green with a section of the wreckage. He is hoping to have a commemorative plaque erected on the site to coincide with the 50th anniversary. Above right: Dick Hamilton, now of Glenroscan, now of Glenroscan, who helped relatives and Volunteer Defence Corps members to locate the missing aircraft after a search of the dense bushland, so dense "it would be possible to pass quite close to the scene of the accident without discovering it".*

ON the night of June 4, 1945, three RAAF Beaufort aircraft took off from Mt Gambier in South Australia for the night portion of Operation Training Exercise Number 6.

This entailed a return flight to Number 1 Operational Training Unit at East Sale, Victoria.

Navigation during the exercise was to be primarily by astronomical means, but radio navigational facilities were available and especially highlighted during the pre-flight briefing.

Seeking flight authorisation, the crew of Beaufort A9-228 were ordered to obtain meteorological reports and provide flight details to the Operations Room, a mandatory procedure not complied with and the first in a succession of fatal errors.

A9-228 departed Mt Gambier at 5.30pm.

The crew consisted of Flying Officer Donald A. Flavel, the pilot and captain; Flying Officer Robert V. Clayton, the navigator; Flying Officer Frederick A. Wallis, the wireless operator/air-gunner; and Flight Sergeant L. J. Sims, also wireless operator/air-gunner.

All radio contact with the bomber ceased after 8.15pm.

Three minutes later several local farmers witnessed the impact of the aircraft as it slammed into a remote hillside, briefly illuminating the wintry night sky.

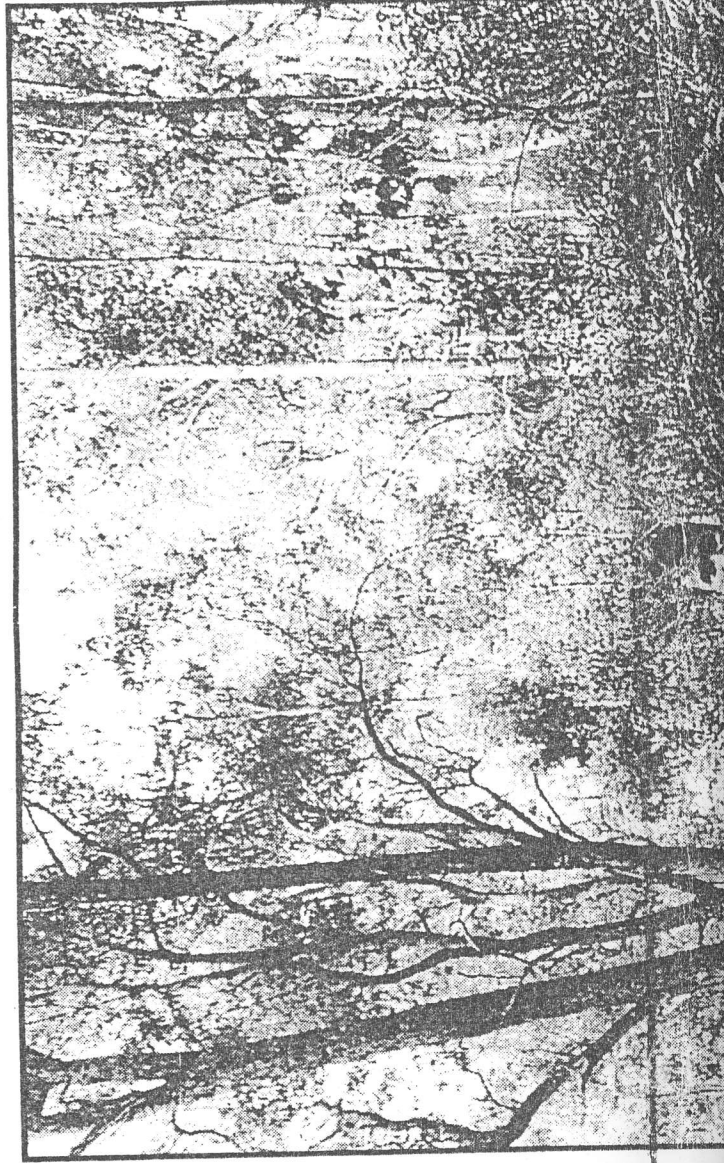
No explosion was heard due to the rugged wooded country and its blanketing effect on sound.

A RAAF court of inquiry into the accident was convened on June 9, 1945, by Squadron Leader H. W. Wheeler of No. 2 Air Observers' School, Mt Gambier, and Flight Lieutenant B. S. Roberts, of No. 1 Operational Training Unit, East Sale.

The investigation found the cause of the accident was fundamentally due to faulty navigation on the part of pilot and crew.

Evidence suggested that the navigator had chosen to exclusively use astro-navigation without verifying the pilot's course, yet there were numerous wireless navigational aids for the other crew members to have used.

Additional errors contributing to the disaster were the incorrect position reports broadcast from the aircraft during the



the 50th anniversary. Above right: Dick Hamilton, now of Glenrowan, who helped relatives and Volunteer Defence Corps aircraft after a search of the dense bushland, so dense "it would be possible to pass quite close to the scene of the acc

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Recent training courses had found the crew to be of an average standard.

Flavel's pilot rating was average minus with a total of 1906 flying hours to his credit.

The pilot and crew were considered physically fit with no evidence of fatigue noticed before taking off. No unserviceability of the aircraft or instruments was reported.

Although the intended altitude of the aircraft was uncertain, other crews in the exercise were obliged to climb to about 8000 feet before clearing the cloud tops, A9-228 most probably doing likewise.

After leaving Mt Gambier, a gross navigational error resulted in the Beaufort flying an easterly heading of about 70 degrees T instead of the required 95 degrees T.

Flight Officer Flavel continued along this track ignorant of any mistake, confirming by radio at 7.06pm that he was 28 miles from the town of Sale.

In reality the crew were completely unaware of their actual position, most likely mistaking the lights of the NSW town of Albury for those of Sale, several hundred miles away.

Failing to locate the East Sale RAAF aerodrome, Flavel retraced his path before once again flying over Albury.

Unable to ascertain his position, he then flew over the surrounding countryside, contacting the East Sale high frequency direction finding station at 7.28pm for a navigational heading. A second bearing request was received by Flavel at 7.54pm. Failing to comply with instructions which would have enabled him to return to base, he flew an erratic path noted by several ground observers.

Descending beneath the low cloud formations, the aircraft was noted at 8.15pm by the Volunteer Air Observation Corps observer at Tallandon to be flying just above a 1500 foot ridge.

The Beaufort's landing lights were clearly visible to those watching below as Flavel unknowingly flew in a south-westerly direction along the Mitta Valley towards Mt Tawonga (4161 feet).

All radio contact with the bomber ceased after 8.15pm.

Three minutes later several local farmers witnessed the impact of the aircraft as it slammed into a remote hillside, briefly illuminating the wintry night sky.

No explosion was heard due to the rugged wooded country and its blanketing effect on sound.

A RAAF court of inquiry into the accident was convened on June 9, 1945, by Squadron Leader H. W. Wheeler of No. 2 Air Observers' School, Mt Gambier, and Flight Lieutenant B. S. Roberts, of No. 1 Operational Training Unit, East Sale.

The investigation found the cause of the accident was fundamentally due to faulty navigation on the part of pilot and crew.

Evidence suggested that the navigator had chosen to exclusively use astro-navigation without verifying the pilot's course, yet there were numerous wireless navigational aids for the other crew members to have used.

Additional errors contributing to the disaster were the incorrect position reports broadcast from the aircraft during the flight. The failure to heed the correct navigational headings given by East Sale and the irregular course flown all contributed to the accident, as did the low altitude flown by the lost aircraft.

This was not only highly dangerous but it also hindered effective wireless operation.

It was the opinion of the court that had A9-228 maintained sufficient height then the transmissions from the Operations Room at East Sale would have guided the pilot and crew home safely.

Based on all available reports, a fruitless five-day search, involving Beaufort aircraft from East Sale and Tiger Moths from Benalla, began at 7am the following morning.

Ground searches were organised by experienced local horsemen and residents. Their participation was recognised by the court who noted that "the ground search parties made commendable efforts to cover the country, but admit that it would be possible to pass quite close to the scene of the accident without discovering it".

The RAAF court of inquiry concluded the location of the accident unknown, but most likely in the region of Mt Tawonga.

Witness accounts had suggested the probable crash site to be on the north-eastern slopes of Mt Tawonga.

Eight weeks after the tragedy a further search was organised through "sheer desperation" by three relatives of Flying Officer Wallis. Acting on RAAF aerial photographs, the men travelled to Eskdale where they contacted the local Volunteer Defence Corps, the Australian equivalent to the English Home Guard.

The Commanding Officer, Acting-Lieutenant Frank (Dick) Hamilton, together with Wallis' relatives and 30 VDC members located the missing aircraft after a 2½-hour search of the dense bushland.

The bodies of the crew were retrieved and a simple cross fashioned from the wreckage left in memorial.

Half a century later, the weathered remains of the Beaufort still litter the remote mountain site.



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