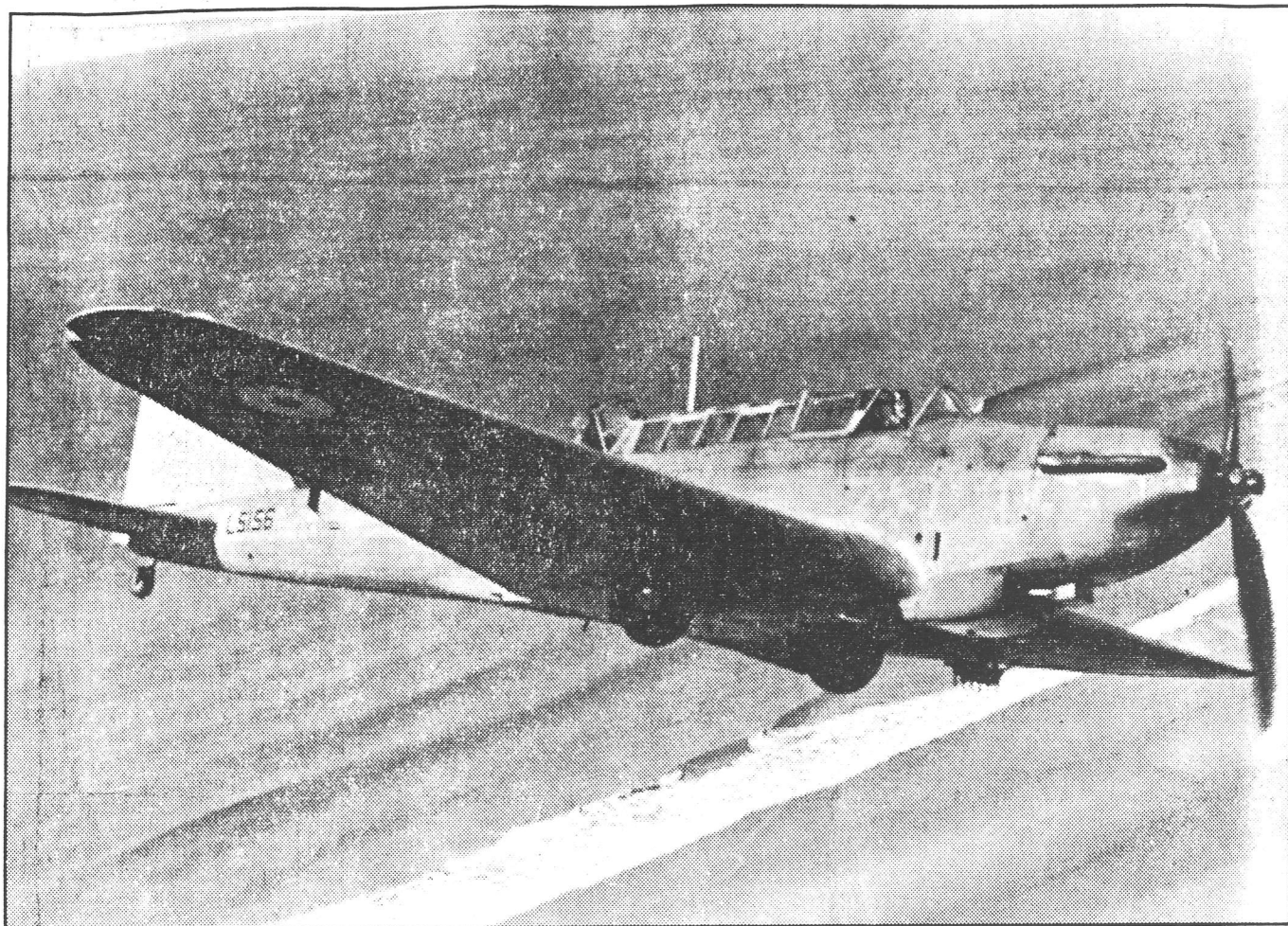


Historic bomber recovered



A Fairey Battle light bomber, the same as the one in which Flight-Lieutenant Ross lost his life, in flight over Australian coastline.

By **BOB PIPER**

The remains of an historic light bomber which crashed on a remote peak near Moss Vale in World War II, has been rediscovered by workmen grading new fire trails in the southern highlands. The Fairey Battle, one of five, was en route to Richmond, NSW, when it came to grief.

Piloting the bomber was Flight-Lieutenant Hector William Ross, of Sydney, a World War I veteran and winner of a Distinguished Flying Cross. Ross died when his parachute lines became entangled in the tailplane.

A flight of five Fairey Battles had left Laverton, Victoria, in fine weather at 1440 hours on February 11, 1941, passing over Cootamundra and Goulburn at 7500 feet. At this point the radio operator in the lead aircraft, Aircraftsman S. R. Read, asked Canberra for a weather report. One was sent back but in a

code he could not understand.

A cloud base of 500 feet, with light rain, forced the formation down low in the Bowral area, where the flight leader, Flying Officer J. C. Black, decided to return to Goulburn using the railway line as a navigation aid. Four aircraft arrived at Goulburn safely, at 1715 hours.

Observers had seen the bomber on the left of the formation (flown by Ross) lose and regain height once or twice as the formation flew over. As the aircraft passed above Moss Vale they turned right but Ross became separated and headed to the south-east, disappearing in thick, low cloud and fog.

Other reports said the clouds were practically on the hilltops and Ross's aircraft had been heard flying inside the mist and rain and around the scene of the crash. The engine was heard . . . throttled back and reopened once or twice, then throttled back

again, and the crash was heard a few seconds later.

Flight-Lieutenant Ross had flown more than 2½ thousand hours during World War I with the Australian Flying Corps in Britain, France and with the occupation force in Germany. He had flown with, and was friends with, Sir Charles Kingsford Smith. As a veteran he had joined the World War II RAAF and completed a training course to fly the Fairey Battle bombers. His squadron commander had assessed him as "a good average pilot". At the time of the accident all five aircraft were en route to Evans Head, on the north coast of NSW, to join No 1 Bombing and Gunnery School. They were to return to Laverton by train.

The Mittagong-Bowral area is notorious even today and has seen numerous aviation accidents throughout the years. Clouds and fog over the hills often bar the Canberra to Sydney route, forcing pilots to

retrace their path to Goulburn, and some still use the main north-south railway line for emergency navigation.

Australia received 366 Fairey Battles from Britain during the war, using them as training aircraft and target tugs. The first was assembled and flown by then Flight-Lieutenant John Lerew, later Group Captain, DFC, on June 29, 1940. They are best described as a slow, elongated Spitfire which were originally front-line bombers used by the British in France, but quickly relegated to the training role because of heavy losses. By 1949, Australia had dismantled all its Battles, many of them ending up as aluminium ingots from the smelter's furnace at Wagga, NSW.

It is hoped that sections of the aircraft can now be recovered and placed in a suitable museum as a tribute to the British bomber and the Australians who flew them half a century ago.