1. Augury

Jim Fairbairn loved flying. When still only 18, freshly released from Geelong Grammar School, he had sailed to Britain from Australia in 1916 to enlist for service in the Royal Flying Corps. He had been an instructor in England, a combat pilot in France, and a prisoner of war in Germany. Shot down and wounded, he carried the memory of his two months at the front in a crippled right arm. Three thousand flying hours later, his last 200,000 miles had been without an accident. Unusually for one so experienced, he had only once damaged an aeroplane. Today, 1 June 1940, in the Spirit of Flinders, the twin-engine de Havilland Dragonfly (VH-ADG) that he cherished, there was to be a blemish on a happily undramatic logbook.

It began as a routine Saturday afternoon flight, one he had taken often with his neighbour and political colleague, the Minister for the Army, Geoff Street. Home to the Fairbairn property at Mount Elephant in the Western District of Victoria, where one of the first tasks of the new owner 16 years earlier had been to create an airstrip. After an exhausting month of attendance to Cabinet, departmental and parliamentary duties, the Minister for Air and his old friend would enjoy a short break together.

The two men had left Essendon airport at 3.30 p.m. Approaching Rokewood, 60 kilometres west of Geelong and some 50 kilometres from their destination, they ran into a rain squall. With severely reduced visibility, an emergency landing was prudent. Fairbairn guided his aircraft towards a field at the Walton family’s Wurrook South sheep property. As his wheels touched the ground it was obvious that the plane was landing in the wrong paddock and running downhill. The prescribed action, instinctive for an experienced aviator, was to take off again. The attempt almost succeeded. But a wheel clipped a fence. After straddling a creek, the aircraft came to rest in a ditch. One of the wheel fairings was bent, the press reported; a propeller had lost a tip, and there was a slit in the cabin three-ply.

The sturdy Dragonfly was quickly repaired and flown back to Melbourne on Monday morning. The pilot and passenger also returned to work, shaken but otherwise none the worse for wear apart from Fairbairn’s lacerated finger. There was a war on. And men who were young enough to have experienced the ghastly realities of an earlier European conflict were not likely to be kept from their duties by a few cuts or bruises.¹

¹ Sydney Morning Herald, Sun News Pictorial, 4 June 1940. I am grateful to Shane Finch and Rene Pompe for assistance in locating the scene of the crash.