14. A passion for the air: James Fairbairn (I)

James Valentine Fairbairn, grazier, politician, flyer, was a man whose adult life had been shaped by war, the Great War. Fairbairn, born in Wadhurst, England, in 1897, grew up in Victoria’s Western District. His grandfather George Fairbairn, who died before he was born, was a pioneer pastoralist whose holdings in Victoria and Queensland totalled millions of acres. His father, Charles, the third of six brothers, had been joint general manager with his brother, George, of the Fairbairns’ Queensland properties. At one time, as another brother, the legendary Cambridge rowing coach Steve Fairbairn, recalled, they were running 300 000 sheep ‘the finest big flock…in the world, but they were travelling all over Australia for food’.1 Charles Fairbairn married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir James Osborne of Yackandandah. He acquired Banongill near Skipton and moved there with his family in the year of his second son James’s birth.

On his eleventh birthday Jim, or Jimmy as some of his friends called him, was despatched with 11 cakes to be a boarder at Geelong Church of England Grammar Preparatory School. In 1909 he moved to the Geelong Grammar senior school, where he had been preceded by his father, five uncles, and his older brother, Charles Osborne, known as Osborne.2 The Fairbairns were a Grammar dynasty, captains of the cricket team, senior prefects and then, spurning the fledgling Melbourne University, undergraduates at Jesus College, Cambridge. Like most of his forebears, Jim’s six years at Geelong were remembered principally for his sporting achievements. He was a member of the running team, played in the tennis four, and rowed in the first eight. Scholastically, he distinguished himself in Classics, winning the prize for Greek in his final year.3

For many of Jim Fairbairn’s generation, their final years of schooling were an unwelcome impediment to joining their older brothers, cousins, and uncles in the great conflict that had engulfed Europe since August 1914. Compulsory military training only added tedium to frustration. ‘I looked forward with hatred to eight years without free Saturday afternoons,’ the mature Fairbairn would testify.4 When he was at last free to pledge his service, the 18-year-old James V. Fairbairn sailed to England, his mind set on entering the Royal Flying Corps. Ten of his Geelong Grammar contemporaries had made the decision to enlist at Christmas 1915.

2 In later life he was ‘popularly known’ as John (Australian Women’s Weekly, 17 Aug. 1940).
4 The Argus, 18 Nov. 1938.
The new boarder

(Courtesy of Geelong Grammar School)

Accompanying Jim on the journey on the P & O liner RMS Medina were his older sister Esther and her friend Inez ‘Gyp’ Currie from the neighbouring ‘Larra’ station at Derrinallum. The young women, too, with no professional training, were intent on finding opportunities to serve. Jim’s older brother Osborne had been at Jesus College, Cambridge, when the war broke out. After a short spell in the 3rd Battalion, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, Osborne had transferred to the RFC. Shot down and wounded in December 1915, he was undergoing a series of operations on what was to remain a disabled left arm.

5 The Argus, 23 Feb. 1916.
Admitted to officer training, Jim was sent to Scotland for flying instruction in June 1916. In letters home he told of flights from Turnhouse over the Forth, where he could soar over the navy’s battle cruiser squadron, but he missed Admiral Beatty’s return from the battle of Jutland because of bad weather. Moved to Stirling, he made ‘nerve-racking’ take-offs and landings from an aerodrome ‘bounded at one end by Stirling castle on a cliff 400 feet high, at the other end by a hangar on one side of the cliff and on the other a thickly wooded hill’. The hills deflected the wind upwards, making violent air bumps that gave the trainees a ‘terrible shock’ at first but ‘soon you hardly take any notice of them’. Hoping no doubt to reassure anxious parents, Jim reported that one of the ‘most extraordinary things about flying is the way people have terrific smashes and don’t get hurt’.

Eleven Geelong Grammar boys about to enlist

(Courtesy of Geelong Grammar School)
At Stirling I saw a man, who was up by himself for the first time, gliding down into the aerodrome at about 75 miles an hour. He was doing turns just [sic] one way then another in order to judge his distance and when he went to make his final turn into the aerodrome by some temporary lapse he banked his machine the wrong way, and still travelling at 75 and side slipping violently he crashed into the ground on one wing. The machine was entirely destroyed and when the ambulance dashed up they found him strolling around the machine, quite unhurt except for a scratch on the ear. And the first day I was here a man stalled his machine three hundred feet from the ground and dived vertically nose first. He would also have come off unhurt only he got his chin over the glass wind screen and had his throat nearly cut, but was otherwise unhurt.
The truth was often harsher. The word ‘crash’, applied to aviation accidents, had been coined in England in 1914. When Paymaster Lieutenant Lidderdale first used it to describe an accident on landing it was thought amusing.7 The humour was short-lived. As Jim Fairbairn and his wartime colleagues were to learn, heavier-than-air machines were unforgiving vehicles. While the youngsters were learning the perils of flight they were also learning the attitudes and habits of the flying elite. ‘Discipline was casual,’ W. E. ‘Bill’ Johns recalled, ‘for the senior officers of the R.F.C. had not had time to grow old.’8 ‘Flying and everything to do with it is an extravagant matter,’ admitted Maurice Baring who served at RFC headquarters throughout the war. As Baring elaborated: ‘The pilot is extravagant, the squadron is extravagant, even the Equipment Officer, even the Technical Sergeant-Major was sometimes found to be extravagant.’ But extraordinary efforts were made to curb ‘useless’ extravagance: ‘even superfluous magneto boxes and an unnecessary indent for lorry cushions were noted’.9 To the extravagance few denied, Baring might have added exhibitionism, more sympathetically described perhaps as an understandable youthful propensity for high jinks. Fairbairn was quick to report his impressions of the revelry that was to become more frenetic in the evening intervals between rehearsals for confrontation with the enemy:

The Flying Corps is very unpopular in a great number of Scotch [sic] towns, because they always try to wake up the inhabitants a bit. At Montrose the Mayor was continually complaining about the way the R.F.C. officers drove their cars and motor bikes about the town. The O.C. was so annoyed that he threatened to fly an aeroplane through the town, and when there was another complaint he went up in a small Bristol Scout and flew it right down the main street below the level of the house tops. After that they decided that it was preferable to have cars scorching through the town than an aeroplane.

After only a week in Stirling, Fairbairn was moved again, this time further south to Croydon. Taking advantage of the long summer evening twilight, flying practice continued until 9.30 p.m. when weather permitted. Happily the base was close enough to London for occasional late-night or Sunday afternoon recreational sorties. Expecting to get his wings in about three weeks or a month, Fairbairn wrote on 29 June 1916 of his latest exploits. ‘A few days ago I was taken up by my flight commander to do “stunts.” It…showed me that you can do whatever you like provided you are high enough and the machine will recover itself.’ For the benefit of earthbound Geelong Grammar boys he explained:

7 Hector Bolitho, War in the Strand: A Notebook of the First Two and a Half Years in London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1942, p.3.
First he climbed up to 400 feet and then stalled the machine a few times. To stall a machine is to lose flying speed so that the machine is no longer under control and dives at the ground for a few hundred feet till flying speed is regained and then it flattens out. When intentionally stalling… you pull the control back till the nose is pointing straight up in the air, then it slowly stops and falls backwards and suddenly nose dives. We did this several times and then tried to loop the loop, but he did not get up sufficient speed and when we got upside down there was not enough pace to take us right over, and we began to fall upside down for nearly a thousand feet, till the machine slowly turned over sideways and righted itself.

Wasn’t this dangerous? Should friends and family be worried? ‘It was a rather horrible sensation while it lasted,’ he admitted, ‘especially as I had no safety belt and had to hold on for all I was worth. Of course,’ he hastened to add, ‘if you loop properly you could not fall out if you tried with all your strength, as the centrifugal force is very great and forces you down into your seat.’ He was perhaps unaware of the fate of several pilots whose seat belts had failed to take the strain. He would certainly have known that parachutes were only issued to the crews of airships and balloons.

Loops, stalls, landings, and take-offs mastered; instruction received in photography, gunnery, aerial observation, and bomb dropping; Jim Fairbairn emerged with his commission as a flying officer in the 17th Reserve Squadron in July 1916. At various flying schools around the country, there had been 178 officers and 15 men in training at the beginning of June. Three months later there were 909 officers and 54 men needing instruction.10 This vast and rapid expansion meant that many just-qualified pilots almost immediately became instructors. So, for two weeks after he graduated, Jim stayed at Croydon as an instructor with No. 43 Squadron, one of ‘a bunch of raw pilots’ as their CO, Major Sholto Douglas, described them, who would endeavour to escape to London each night at 19.00 and return for duty at 09.00 the next morning.11 Then it was to Netheravon in Wiltshire to practise on Bristol Scouts while 54 Squadron waited to take out ‘Sopwith fighting machines’ to France.

---

Netheravon, as another young Australian trainee flyer reported six months later, ‘is situated in a most drearisome place on Salisbury Plain, miles from any town…However it is an ideal place for an aerodrome with plenty of good fields for landing.’ Jim proudly explained that the new Sopwiths, highly manoeuvrable at great heights, were ‘about the best machines that we have, only one squadron of them has gone out before, and they did marvels, and strafed every Hun machine that they met’. Arthur Gould Lee, who had to wait three months after getting his wings before being allowed into the cockpit of a Pup in April 1917, was to describe it as ‘a dream to fly, so light on the control,'
so effortless to handle, so sweet and amenable, and so eagerly manoeuvrable that you found yourself doing every kind of stunt without a thought — loops, sideslip landings, tail slides, rolls, spins'.

In London, Fairbairn had seen old boys from Geelong Grammar, some of them resting or recuperating from wounds. A star among them, Alex Russell — Osborne Fairbairn’s friend, and four years Jim’s senior, a prefect, captain of the 1st XI, member of the 1st XVIII football team and the shooting team — his Cambridge engineering studies abandoned, was now an artillery lieutenant. He was recovering after being buried by a shell burst. Russell, soon to be engaged and married to Fairbairn’s cousin Jess, elder daughter of Frederick W. Fairbairn, had been 14 months at the front. By the end of the war he would be Major Russell MC. John Webster, a younger and close companion from schooldays, recently awarded the Military Cross, ‘was very badly knocked about and has nearly 70 scars on his body’. On Salisbury Plain, Australians were everywhere, including ‘Chettie’ Manifold (a lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery), Les Chomley on the staff of ‘General’ (temporary Brigadier-General commanding the 3rd Division Artillery) Harold Grimwade, and others from Geelong. The lucky ones were taken up for a short flight; all were treated to an exhibition of loops each day over the Larkhill camp.

Fairbairn’s squadron had been told they were to be ‘used exclusively for fighting and long reconnaissances’. Writing on 26 September 1916 he could scarcely contain his joy that they were not to be required for bombing or artillery spotting: ‘Fighting is much the best fun in France especially on a really good machine.’ Such was the ‘fun’ that in the previous week 20 RFC aircraft had been lost. The German ace Oswald Boelcke had been responsible for one of them; and a new pilot, Lieutenant Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, for a second. The British press was more interested in the latest four combat victories of Captain Albert Ball DSO MC. But those who understood the growing German dominance of the air were increasingly alarmed. On September 30, Major General Hugh Trenchard, GOC of the Flying Corps, wrote to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir William Robertson, at the War Office urging the accelerated supply of fighters capable of competing with the best German machines. British losses in the air were unsustainable. At the beginning of July 1916 there had been 426 pilots available for duty. By November 17 there were 585 with their squadrons. In the meantime, 308 had been killed, wounded or were missing, and another 268 had been removed from active duty from other causes. In the same period, 191 observers had been lost. These were not statistics to be shared with the young men on their way to the front.

Real stunts

It was not until Christmas Day 1916 that Fairbairn's No. 54 Squadron, with their 18 Sopwith Scouts, arrived in France. Until then the only squadron equipped with the Pups, as they were called unofficially, was No. 8 Royal Naval Air Service, whose B Flight was commanded by the Australian ace, Flight Lieutenant S. J. Goble. Naval Eight, as it was known, had become operational on November 3. The RFC had one squadron of Nieuport 17s for its fighter pilots, French-designed, proven, and popular. 'A little daisy of a machine,' the Canadian Billy Bishop called it, 'with all the daintiness of a Parisienne.' The rest were condemned to go up day after day in obsolescent two-seater pusher DH 2s and FE 8s. Fairbairn was lucky. He had filled in the last two months assisting in the air defence of London. Scores of other freshly qualified pilots had been sent to France with an average of about 17 hours of solo flight. He had more time to gain knowledge and confidence in a safe environment, to learn a little about formation flying, so crucial for survival against superior German forces.

Flying a Pup, 'smooth and stable, mellow like old wine', as a contemporary fighter pilot described them, Fairbairn imbibed the new trade of aerial reconnaissance and combat over the next six weeks. Under Major K. K. Horn MC, No. 54 Squadron began operations on January 11. Before coming out to France Fairbairn had learned of how a novice pilot had shot down the German ace, Immelman. 'It shows that there is a considerable element of luck in air fighting.' And, as his squadron motto said, 'Audax omnia perpeti' (Boldness to endure anything). If luck was with him at first, on 14 February 1917 his fortune changed. Perhaps by now he realised as Alec Little, another Australian with Naval 8, reported on December 30, the deficiencies of the outclassed Pup on escort duty: relatively poor manoeuvring powers and a slow-firing gun, in particular.

Ten scouts of No. 54 Squadron were assigned to escort 10 planes of the reconnaissance squadron that shared their aerodrome. They were charged with taking photographs of the sector between Cambrai and St. Quentin, some 20 miles across the lines. With his 80hp Rhone engine failing as they reached the target, Fairbairn was forced to break off from the formation and head back to the lines. Swarmed over by a superior force of 'Hun scouts', he and several of his friends did not make it back. His own machine shredded by the German guns and barely controllable, and with one arm shattered, Fairbairn was eventually brought down. After some months of suspense following reports that he was

missing in action, relieved family and friends heard that he was a prisoner of war. Informed only that he had a broken leg, they were unaware of the extent of his injuries.18

The downed pilot’s dramatic narrative account of his experience, written from internment in June, revealed how lucky he was to survive. Noticing that his engine was spluttering and dropping revs, he had signalled to his flight commander that he could not continue and must turn for home:

Then the fun began. Immediately the Huns started to dive on my tail and flanks from all directions. I held straight on till they got to close range and opened fire; at once I turned and attacked the nearest machine which dived vertically, then began to spin and was still spinning when I lost sight of it.

Fairbairn turned and fought five or six times and then, a mile from home, at 2000 feet, he tried to turn and fire at the last four of his pursuers but the machine did not respond:

I looked to see what had happened, and noticed that my hand had fallen off the control stick whereupon I concluded that I was wounded, so took the stick in my left hand. Then I did an Immelmann turn, but when I tried to get my machine off the bank I found that my lateral control was broken and there was no means of getting the bus level again.

Forced to descend in a vertical spiral, he crashed as gently as he could, turned a catherine wheel on the ground, and came to rest, ‘my nose sticking into the ground and my tail in the air’.

Some Huns came running up from every direction, swords drawn and bayonets fixed as though they had half the British Army to deal with. I tried to get my revolver out but found I could not reach it with my left hand, so I decided there was nothing to be done but burn my machine and ‘wait and see’, so I threw a match into a pool of petrol that was dripping from my engine and tried to clamber out, but found to my consternation that I could not get my belt undone, as it was clasped under my left armpit and could only be got at with the right hand, which was not taking much interest in life at the moment. However a

---

18 J. V. Fairbairn, Royal Air Force Casualty Cards, RAF Museum, courtesy Peter Elliott; International Committee of the Red Cross Archives record: James V. Fairbairn, 2nd Lt, Royal Flying Corps, captured in Péronne 14 Feb. 1917; wounded. Present in Reslz. [Reserve Lazarett] Hann[oversch] Münden, coming from Krgslz [Kriegslazarett = War Dept Hospital] I Western (list dated 9 May 1917). Interned military [no place indicated]. Arrived on 14 April 1918, coming from Hanover (list dated 7 May 1918); Trevor Henshaw, The Sky Their Battlefield: Air Fighting and the Complete List of Allied Air Casualties from Enemy Action in the First War, Grub Street, 1995, p.137 describes Fairbairn as the first Sopwith Pup pilot lost in action by the RFC and notes the claim of Lt George Schlenker of Jasta 3 to this, the second of his 14 victories.
Hun cut my belt with his clasp knife, and hauled me out of the fire, but not until I had given a very life-like imitation of Guy Fawkes for the space of about a minute.

Press reports in later years echoed the Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook in saying that Jim Fairbairn had been ‘Credited in official communiques with destroying two hostile aircraft’. He said that he had seen one enemy plane go down; and a German flieger officer, congratulating him on the fight he had put up, told him that two of the 10 pilots who attacked him had been killed. These stories were not denied but there was no confirmation in official records.

What was undoubtedly true was that badly wounded, scorched, but alive, Jim Fairbairn had beaten the odds. If a new pilot in France had survived incompetent teaching, poorly constructed training aircraft, and foolhardy stunting over his base, he had an 80 per cent chance of becoming a casualty before he flew 20 missions. Rationalising the loss of lives in ‘stunting’ during training earlier in the war, the commander of the British Air Mission in Washington told an Academy of Sciences audience a year after Fairbairn was shot down that the danger was not in stunting but in not being able to stunt: ‘The man who is going to come out alive is the one who can outdo his opponent in flying…unless you are trained to do real stunts (which are really not at all dangerous), you are not going to be able to down him.’

In fact, though it was not known precisely at the time, about seven in 10 of the casualties among first-year pilots were victims of their own errors rather than the combat skill of the enemy. As P. G. Taylor recalled: ‘It was said…that any pilot who destroyed more German aircraft than British had justified his existence. This did not always happen. A friend of mine in the RFC crashed five British aircraft, and was therefore said to be a German ace!’ Of the youthful survivors, the Australian war records historian Harry Gullett was to write to his

---

wife a few months later: ‘it is hard to believe such schoolboys can be captains with wonderful records’. It was true that, before appalling attrition rates led to selection of many from the ‘lower middle classes and some from the artisan class’, most pilots were likely to have been previously ‘the public schoolboy, the cavalry officer, or the athlete’. Whatever their background, by their own testimony ‘it appears necessary for the well-being of the average pilot that he should indulge in a really riotous evening at least once or twice a month’.

For Jim Fairbairn, public schoolboy, horseman, and athlete, fortnightly indulgences came to an abrupt halt. His fate is best told in his own words, writing from an officers’ prison in Germany on 3 March 1917:

When I was at the French town where I was kept for three days after coming down, I met some of the officers who had claimed to have brought me down. They were very nice, and obviously gentlemen and sportsmen, and laughed heartily when I told them that it was my engine that brought me down really though I could have glided home if I had not had to turn and drive them away every few yards…

Some German stretcher-bearers took me to a neighbouring dressing station. The worst part of the whole show was being shelled by our own guns; one of the bearers was hit but they behaved splendidly.

Taken to Germany in an evil-smelling ‘hospital train’, accompanied by Russian prisoners wounded by British shelling while digging trenches for the Germans, the young flyer got his ‘first glimpse of the true German spirit’:

Whenever I wanted anything the Huns simply tumbled over themselves to do it; when the Russians asked anything they were answered as though they were dogs, German dogs, of course, as no civilised person could ever speak or act to a dog as the Huns did to these poor helpless prisoners.

The journey took two days and nights:

If it had lasted much longer I believe I would have gone quite mad. The Russians, on the other hand, although very badly wounded, considered themselves in clover, being able to lie and rest for once, the first real rest for three years, even if it was in a bumpy goods van.

---

A prisoner of war in Holland and then a convalescent in neutral Switzerland for a total of 14 months, Fairbairn carried with him thereafter a permanent reminder of his war service in a burnt face and a crippled right arm, shattered at the elbow by a bullet from a German Spandau. Doctors in the prison hospital had been reluctant to operate as the broken bones set slowly and grew together, and fragments of bone were expelled from the dressed wounds. Captivity was a time of boredom punctuated by pain. There was some relief in the company of a French priest, the only other prisoner who could walk. ‘In apologising to the Frenchman for not understanding his language better I said “At school I spent so much time learning Latin and Greek languages that I rather neglected French.”’ The priest promptly offered to speak Latin instead but the embarrassed young flyer had the presence of mind to say that he would prefer to practise his French.27 Fairbairn was eventually exchanged for a wounded German airman, and entered the Prince of Wales Hospital in Marylebone in April 1918.

By war’s end, 417 Geelong Grammarians had enlisted; 87 did not return.28 For many of the survivors like Jim Fairbairn, in London after the Armistice and back home in Australia, there was to be recurring medical treatment. Jim Fairbairn would submit in all to 20 operations. Now the recipient of a small RAF war pension, he sailed home on the P & O’s Orvieto, converted from its wartime mine-laying and armed merchant-cruiser roles. He arrived in Melbourne in December 1919. Though he may not have been aware of it, Fairbairn’s return to Australia was in the same vessel on which the AIF’s first 91 officers and 1347 men had left Sydney in 1914, including the chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel C. B. B. White, Major J. Gellibrand, Lieutenant R. G. Casey, and the official correspondent, C. E. W. Bean.29

Chettie Manifold, a lifelong friend and neighbour, recalled:

> After the War he spent several years in the hands of doctors in an endeavour to regain the use of his right arm without success. This wound greatly restricted his activities in after life. He was a keen tennis & squash player & learnt to play left handed. As a result of a circular saw accident he lost two fingers on his left hand. He then through sheer determination learnt to play right handed with considerable success.

In fact, as Fairbairn’s niece Alethea Russell remembered, after losing one finger in the circular saw incident, her uncle accidentally discharged a gun while he

---

had a finger in the barrel. Thus, having taught himself to play tennis left-handed after the war, he had to learn to throw up the ball with his right hand and revert to playing right-handed.30

Keen-eyed readers of The Herald on 15 February 1940 would have noticed in a photograph that the third finger of the Air Minister’s left hand was severed at the knuckle, and the ring finger was completely absent. In spite of these afflictions ‘you would have to watch him pretty carefully to realise that he had quite a disability in one of his arms’, George Jones remembered as a senior RAAF advisor to the minister. ‘It wasn’t very conspicuous.’31 As John Manifold, Fairbairn’s colleague on the Geelong Grammar School Council, testified: ‘Disability that would have handicapped most men, he simply disregarded.’32

What was conspicuous if you visited Fairbairn at Mount Elephant, the one-time Chirnside and Currie property near Derrinallum he acquired in 1924, were the pictorial reminders of aerial warfare and post-war aviation development — cartoons on the wall, and magazines in the billiard room. Jim Fairbairn’s own airstrip and private plane, 176 kilometres west of Melbourne, completed the picture of a dedicated aviator. On his desk, a decade after the war ended, there were photographs of two men. John Webster, his school friend, killed in Palestine, had run out of money while on leave in 1918, and returned to active service when multiple wounds should have kept him at home. Close by was Charles Hawker, another Geelong Old Grammian, the great friend of his later years in Parliament, grievously wounded, crippled, disfigured, and enduring never-ending pain. Hawker’s death in an aircraft accident in 1938 would stun Jim Fairbairn and the many colleagues who had looked to him as the man who should lead the United Australia Party when the Prime Minister, Joe Lyons, eventually retired.33

Fairbairn, flanked by Chettie Manifold, had married Daisy Olive ‘Peggy’ Forrester, daughter of Charles and Alice Forrester of Toorak, in March 1923. It was, said The Argus, ‘a wedding that attracted wide interest’. The bride’s father was an estate and commission agent, and a stalwart of the Australian Club; she had two surviving brothers, one of whom, Charles Lamont Forrester, was to set up in the city as an auctioneer a few years later.34 Among Peggy’s bridesmaids was Jim’s younger sister, Betty Fairbairn. During the previous Easter, Jim and Betty had reached the semi-finals of the mixed doubles at the Geelong Lawn Tennis Club’s Annual Tournament. Had they won they would have met Miss Forrester and her partner in the final. By November, Jim Fairbairn and

34 The Argus, 28 June 1935 (Charles Forrester obituary).
Peggy Forrester were paired in the mixed doubles handicap at the Victorian championship. With the new partnership confirmed for life at St John’s Church, Toorak, two children, Geoffrey and Angela, quickly followed.

Jim Fairbairn and Peg (as her husband and close friends called her) embraced the opportunities their privileged life offered. They thrived in the company of the younger generation. Jim enjoyed taking Peter and John Mercer, sons of a neighbour, on flights to Melbourne, returning with a copy of The Herald 4.00 p.m. edition for the boys’ father. When there were no youngsters to disembark, he would drop the folded paper from the air, usually managing to avoid the big dam just outside the garden fence. On weekends and school holidays there was a parade of family visitors at Mount Elephant.

Mount Elephant estate homestead
(Courtesy of Fay Stokie-Ryan and Virginia ‘Bardie’ Mercer)

It was a fine homestead on the banks of Lake Logan, known throughout the Western District as the ‘swagman’s lighthouse’. To Gillian Gubbins, Peggy Fairbairn’s niece, there was an unforgettable aura about that ‘elegant, spacious home…Geoffrey and Angela having their own quarters, surrounded by a magnificent well-manicured garden, two tennis courts (one grass, one hard court), a squash court (quite rare in the 1930s), a lake complete with boat and fishing gear’. For Geoffrey there were memorable older visitors:

...a hairy and beloved uncle who had landed at Gallipoli; another, equally loved, who had been decorated for rescuing a man who fell overboard from a Dover-Calais troop transport; yet another who had won the A.F.C. for restoring the depleted morale of his air squadron by stunting in the face of the enemy...37

Successful on the land, Jim had run the family’s Peak Downs station in central Queensland for five years before buying Mount Elephant for himself. He was a progressive farmer, one of the first, his daughter said, to have Southdown rams cover Corriedales. He represented his district in the Graziers’ Association of Victoria.38 Raised as a Presbyterian, he became active in Anglican diocesan affairs, and in the Old Geelong Grammarians Association and School Council. He had dipped his toe in local politics late in 1924, losing by 288 votes to 171 to his friend and neighbour Geoff Street in an extraordinary election for a vacancy in the North Riding of the Shire of Hampden. But it was an invitation to attend a private meeting at the recently launched Constitutional Club in Melbourne on 29 April 1926 that was to transform his life. It was a remarkable gathering. His friend Alex Russell was there, now both a national golf champion and budding course designer, and lately companion and private secretary to the Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce.39 So also were two of the Manifolds (a third sent apologies); Fairbairn’s cousin George; the young city commercial lawyer Trevor Oldham; Lionel Grimwade of the Melbourne pharmaceutical and chemicals family, a former Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy officer and now a stockbroker with William Noall & Sons; Harold Oscar Nevett, a Camperdown solicitor and friend of the Manifolds and Geoff Street; Billy Kent Hughes, gallant Light Horseman and Olympic athlete; and the man who organised the meeting, Keith Officer. Among those who sent apologies were Geoff Street and Alex Russell’s cousin Max Bell, of Golf Hill, chairman of the pastoral company Dennys Lascelles and a council member and benefactor of Geelong Grammar.40

What had brought these young men together? Keith Officer, from the Western District and Melbourne Grammar, trained as a lawyer, a decorated AIF staff officer, had returned to Australia in 1924 after three years in Nigeria with the British Colonial Service and an interval in London. He was ostensibly working

in his father’s accountancy firm but had begun the clandestine development of an integrated conservative organisation to compete more effectively against the Australian Labor Party. Officer and his associates, including the ambitious young barrister Robert Gordon Menzies, were creating a political action movement. Nationalist fortunes in Victoria were at a low ebb with a Country Party government in power. Officer saw the need both to revive the Nationalists’ urban appeal and to reconnect the party to rural voters. Their evolving plan was to diminish control of party finances by the recently unmasked National Union powerbrokers, infiltrate party branches, nominate candidates, and eventually install a new party leader. Fairbairn, present at the creation, was to be an active participant in the unfolding of the strategy that led to the creation of the Young Nationalist Movement three years later with Menzies soon at its head. Fairbairn’s own Hampden district was the first with its own finance committee. He himself with Chester Manifold (now married to Gwenda Grimwade, his old CO’s daughter), assisted by H. O. Nevett, was soon drawn into local government as a member of Hampden Shire Council along with Geoff Street. With Trevor Oldham, Manifold, and Bob Menzies, Jim was elected to the executive of the Young Nationalists, Menzies becoming president in February 1931. The ‘fighting platform’ of the organisation declared that the ‘restoration’ of government finance through balanced budgets was the key to a return to national prosperity.

In May 1932 Jim Fairbairn became Member of the Legislative Assembly for Warrnambool. For some two years as an endorsed Nationalist he had cultivated the former Country Party seat now held by Henry Bailey, Minister for Lands in the Hogan Labor government, but standing as a Premier’s Plan candidate. Proclaiming his faith in free enterprise, and supported by the Australian Women’s National League as well as the National Federation, Fairbairn said his principal aim in standing was to defend the interests of primary producers. Harry Gullett’s friend Colonel George Langley, headmaster of the local high school, acted as his campaign manager. Fairbairn would lend Langley his Buick from time to time to assist the campaign as well as making it possible for Langley to enjoy occasional family outings. Robert Menzies came down to speak for the candidate at a well-attended Town Hall meeting in the week before the election. The friendly Camperdown Chronicle and Terang Express had previously

42 Keith Officer’s hitherto unnoticed role in organising a Nationalist revival in Victoria in the 1920s is described in Alan Fewster, Trusty and Well Beloved: A Life of Keith Officer Australia’s First Diplomat, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2009, pp.90–102, 107–8. For details of H. O. Nevett’s professional and political interests I am grateful to his son, Guy Nevett (telephone interview, 2 Aug. 2007). Phylia Keble-Johnston kindly provided information about her father, Lionel Grimwade (telephone interview, 4 Dec. 2007).
43 Manifold, Street, and Fairbairn look thoughtfully into the camera in a 1930 council photograph (R. A. McAlpine, The Shire of Hampden 1863–1963, Terang Express, 1963, p.20). The photograph has now been lost.
lauded ‘Three Virile Politicians’ — Menzies, Manifold, and Fairbairn — but the blatant bias of the Warrnambool Standard probably did more to contribute to a resounding victory over the ‘effete generation’. The next year Fairbairn retired from the Hampden council on the expiration of his term. His sights were set higher.

After only 17 months in the Victorian Parliament with Chettie Manifold, Billy Kent Hughes, and Bob Menzies, Fairbairn resigned to contest a by-election in the federal seat of Flinders, vacated by Stanley Bruce. It was a path from state to national politics that had been trodden by his uncle Sir George Fairbairn. Flinders, running around the southeast edge of Port Phillip Bay, included the southern Mornington Peninsula, and reached the shores of Western Port Bay, embracing Phillip and French Islands as well as the holiday resorts of Portsea, Sorrento, and Rosebud. Normally it was a safe conservative seat for a favoured candidate whose presence in Canberra was desired by party chieftains. Bruce, who had a 16-room mansion in Frankston, had regained the seat in 1931 after being ejected in 1929 because of what his Labor opponent E. J. Holloway called ‘the wilfulness and overbearing class bias of his policies’. Fairbairn, who would never live in the electorate, had all the class but none of the overbearing bias of the former Prime Minister. The ‘flying MP’, as he was soon dubbed, caught the eye of the press at once by piloting his own plane to Canberra for his parliamentary debut. The train would have taken him 16 to 19 hours, he said. Even the five-hour flight itself was too long, so he was contemplating buying a faster machine.

**The flying MP**

Tanned, fit, firm-jawed, blue-eyed, his fair reddish hair and moustache neatly clipped, the young backbencher was soon noticed on the national stage. Everyone knew his flying credentials. Personally disappointed by being rejected as medically unfit for the Citizen Air Force, he was on record as a critic of government aviation policy. He served on the executive of an evanescent lobby group of ex-wartime flyers calling itself the Air Convention. Eric Roberts (who was simultaneously embroiled in the shadowy League of National Security), the aero club pioneer Major Harry Turner Shaw, and the struggling airline operator Jimmy Larkin had been alleging malpractice in the subsidised

---

46 Sydney Morning Herald, 29 Nov. 1933.
monopoly airlines and favouritism in the administration of civil aviation. Larkin and Shaw were the spokesmen. Fairbairn, ‘slightly out of place with legalities and formalities’, as a young public servant was to observe, was never a fluent speaker. Reserved, some people thought, with a quiet, deliberate manner of speaking. But he was at home with graziers and club men as well as those with experience of war and ‘wind in the wires’; and his pastoral background allowed him to speak with authority on rural production and marketing. In 1932 he had made a hurried trip to England to study the quality and marketing of Australian butter. Irregular supplies and competition from higher-grade Danish butter were handicapping Australian exports. Flying to Denmark in the company of a Warrnambool dairyman, he spent two days investigating Danish farming practices, concluding that their pasturing and dairying methods are ‘far from ultra modern’. Where the Danes excelled was in the high average standard of their herds and their marketing. With immediate prospects for the Australian dairy industry gloomy, he advocated methodical herd testing, culling of all but the truly profitable cows and, where feasible, converting to mixed farming. In London, in May 1933, he spoke to the committee of the Empire Parliamentary Association on the practical working and future possibilities of closer settlement in Victoria.

Fairbairn had ideas about world affairs. He had enjoyed a private audience with Benito Mussolini in April 1933. ‘In the Duce’, he enthused, ‘the Italian people have an asset worth more than all the golden hoards of America.’ Agreeing with Il Duce that there was little prospect that any international monetary or credit scheme would raise wholesale price levels and stimulate world trade, he pointed out the great difficulties attending tariff reduction. Understandably, the new member’s principal focus in the House of Representatives was rural. He spoke in defence of dairy producers, the preservation of large-scale sheep studs, the adjustment of farmers’ debt and, drawing on personal knowledge, he forecast the future value of Corriedales, and the present benefits of the restored fertiliser bounty:

…nine years ago a property of 4,000 acres of which I have the direction, in Victoria, carried 3,000 sheep indifferently, although the season was good. This year the same property will shear over 10,000 sheep, almost entirely owing to the use of superphosphate on its pastures…The production of wool…has increased from 54 bales to over 220 bales…

50 J. V. Fairbairn, ‘Impressions of a Short Visit to Rome’, reproduced from The Standard (Warrnambool), 19 April 1933, copy courtesy of Mary Browne.
When those 3,000 sheep were carried…it was not possible to carry any cattle, except a few milkers, yet it is now carrying 350 head of cattle. The 3,000 sheep were looked after by one station hand with very occasional assistance in the way of casual labour, whereas at present five men are permanently employed.51

For all that he was recognised as someone who spoke authoritatively on behalf of graziers, Fairbairn was also welcomed into the city corporate world with invitations to sit on the board of the Union Trustee Company of Australia (replacing Sir George Fairbairn who had served for 40 years) and the Victorian board of the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney, the domain of Sir Robert Knox, the leading conservative powerbroker.

No one who knew ‘JV’ doubted that his flying was much more than a hobby. His deep belief in the future of aviation was exemplified annually through the early 1930s to generations of teenage boys who were brought together in Lord Somers’ camps.

Yellow Group and its leader, Lord Somers’ Camp, January 1932
(Courtesy of Pat Lesslie and Alan Gregory)

51 CPD, House of Representatives, 26 July 1934, p.794.
As a camp group leader, Fairbairn would fly in every January and land in a nearby playing field to take his place with Wilfrid ‘Billy’ Kent Hughes, Squadron Leader Ray Brownell, Gilbert Castieau (Assistant Solicitor-General), and other civic leaders.\(^52\) He would take the Somers boys up in the air, imagining for them a future in which as men they would commute 150 miles to work, meet their wives after they had a day’s shopping in the city, and fly them home to the country ‘in time to cook dinner’. It was a vision that his own wife did not share with him. ‘Peg you will be pleased to hear is getting air minded at last’, he told Charles Hawker in February 1935. But it was a false dawn. Although ‘she thinks nothing of flying to Melbourne & back for a day’s shopping’, Peggy Fairbairn was not a light plane enthusiast.\(^53\) Fast cars — even for a journey from Sydney to Melbourne — were always more to her taste.

In Parliament, Fairbairn was cautious about predictions and silent on spousal preferences. But he raised questions about subsidies to aero clubs, the desirability of creating a new airport at Fishermen’s Bend to replace Essendon, the poor condition of Canberra aerodrome, the improbability of any increase in efficiency resulting from the establishment of a Civil Aviation Board, and the resentment of the airline industry at the practice of holding secret inquiries into aircraft accidents. After the loss of a DH86 in Bass Strait in October 1935, the third DH86 to crash, he rose to the defence of the British aircraft before a court of inquiry had reported:

A little while ago I had an opportunity to hold a lengthy conversation with one of the chief pilots of Qantas, during which we discussed frankly the eccentricities of various aeroplanes, and I asked him whether he had any misgivings at all about the DH86 machines. The pilot assured me they were the finest machines he had ever flown…

…I consider that as much publicity as possible should be given to the findings of the court…the publication of the causes or possible causes of these accidents will have the effect of restoring confidence, rather than of causing uneasiness.

On one point he was emphatic. There was, he said, a certain reluctance by many people to testify at an inquiry ‘because they feel that they may seem to be maligning the dead pilot of the ill-fated aeroplane’. But it was the duty of those with relevant knowledge to appear as witnesses and tell of what they knew.\(^54\)


\(^{53}\) Fairbairn to Hawker, 28 Feb. 1935, Hawker MSS, NLA MS 4848/1/1.

\(^{54}\) Sydney Morning Herald, 4 July 1935, 1 Dec. 1939; CPD, House of Representatives, 17 Oct. 1935, p.835. For anxieties, investigations, and confidential consultations on the safety of the DH86, see NAA: MP187, 3, and T. W. White to Vera White 15 Mar. 1936, T. W. White MSS, NAA MS9148, 2/2: ‘The machines have a bad reputation and I have been warned not to travel in them.’ A pilot recalled that quite a few words would be said ‘if an air hostess walked too quickly fore or aft…because down would go the nose’. (Willis Reeve, ‘A talk to the AHSA meeting 24 May 1978’, Aviation Heritage, vol. 43, no.1, March 2012, p.41).
When he began to travel regularly between Canberra and Melbourne, Fairbairn soon attracted attention by flying himself in the second-hand Metal Moth he had bought in April 1931. Sometimes it was unwanted attention. The ‘grazier pilot’ had already made headlines in March 1932 when he smashed up the nose of his Moth, crash-landing in a field half a mile from Camperdown on the way home from a Hampden Shire Council meeting. Belatedly adjusting his goggles, he inadvertently touched the controls and flew into the only tree in the paddock. Apart from a scratch over his right eye, only his pride was injured. But it was a sharp reminder of the need to be careful in the cockpit. In July 1934, at Duntroon aerodrome, there was trouble of a different kind. Someone took a knife to the fabric of his recently acquired DH85 Leopard Moth’s wings, slashing them so severely that it was too dangerous to fly. Even without malicious damage, Fairbairn family flying could have tragic consequences. As Betty Fairbairn told the press, when asked if she intended to try to lower Amy Johnson’s time for a flight from England to Darwin, ‘It’s then that people crash.’

Without chasing records, Jim’s youngest brother, George Patrick ‘Pat’, was to die with his wife Mary at the controls when their Spartan Arrow ran out of fuel and crashed soon after take-off from Essendon in May 1935. Pat had made headlines in 1931 while still a 22-year-old undergraduate at Jesus College, Cambridge, when he flew in a deliberately leisurely fashion from England to Australia in an overloaded Gipsy I Moth. The risk of the flight was reduced by the presence of a passenger, a fellow undergraduate and previous flight companion, Kenneth Shenstone, soon to become managing director of a family firm supplying leading aircraft companies with machine tools. It was sobering for Jim Fairbairn to learn from a private briefing how his 26-year-old brother and sister-in-law may have died, leaving a 14-month old orphan daughter, Frances Mary. They had simply failed to fill their petrol tank before leaving Wooloomanata, their home at Lara. The deficiency might have been remedied had Pat not declined, as he usually did, to refuel at Essendon the next day. Although the Air Accidents Investigation Committee had no choice but to disclose that Mrs Fairbairn was not authorised to carry a passenger in Spartan aircraft, they softened their finding by concluding that there was no reason to doubt her competency to fly the aircraft. Evidence from the proprietor of the Hart Aircraft Company that Pat Fairbairn was very casual about the maintenance of his aircraft — ‘the way he used to keep the machine was a disgrace’ — was not mentioned in the Investigation Committee’s report.

55 The Argus, 5 March, 17 April 1932.
56 Edward P. Wixted, The North-West Aerial Frontier 1919–1934, Boolarong Publications, 1985, p.94 has Fairbairn and Shenstone flying the Spartan Arrow to Australia. Contemporary Northern Territory newspapers do not identify the aircraft type.
57 NAA: MP187, 4/144. Much of the archival material on which this paragraph was based was subsequently published in Neil Follett, ‘An Accident Investigation: George Patrick Fairbairn’, Aviation Heritage, vol. 42, no. 4, Dec. 2011, pp.174–9. A coronial inquest had concluded that it was impossible to determine the ‘actual cause’ of the crash (Camperdown Chronicle, 29 June 1935). There is no substance to the theory that ‘the plane’s controls had been jammed by a large suitcase’ (Tink, Air Disaster, p.108). Frances Mary’s maternal grandparents became her guardians. With the concurrence of her trustee, Osborne Fairbairn, she was given the adopted name of Murray-Fairbairn (The Argus, 22 June 1939).
Amid his other responsibilities, Jim had found time to fly his Leopard Moth cabin tourer (VH-UUL) 7075 miles around northern Australia in 1935 with his other brother, Osborne, to whom he had sold his Gipsy Moth the previous year. The 'Flying Fairbairns' the press called them. Reflecting on the trip, he suggested that it would be helpful to aviators if every post office and railway station in the country should have the name of the town painted on its roof in as big letters as possible. He then left on a Qantas mail plane to England, where Peggy had taken a flat for six months, returning the following year in his own brand-new de Havilland Dragonfly. Osborne Fairbairn, unfazed by the deaths of his other brother and sister-in-law whose estate he was now managing, was again the buyer of Jim's redundant aircraft, this time (September 1936) the Leopard Moth, VH-URK.58 The dual-control DH90, a streamlined twin-engine biplane, had a plywood fuselage skin and high aspect ratio wings. Its list price was £2650 sterling. Normally accommodating up to five passengers and crew, Jim Fairbairn’s craft had one passenger seat removed and an extra fuel tank installed. It had a cruising speed of 127 mph though he usually kept to around 115 mph on the long trip home.

With a young Sydney pilot, Frank Thomas, navigating and sharing the flying, Fairbairn had set off from Lympne on 14 September 1936 intending to reach Vienna in one hop. Fog made them set down in Brussels before flying along the Rhine through bad weather to Budapest. He attended a parliamentary congress in Bucharest, flew across Turkey and thence via Basra and Karachi to Delhi, Calcutta, Rangoon, Bangkok, Penang, Singapore, Surabaya, and Koepang. They reached Darwin, clad in khaki shorts, coats and topees, on October 3. At about the same time, Peggy Fairbairn was about to board ship for an unhurried voyage home from Naples. When the Orontes docked in Adelaide, Jim was there to meet her and fly her to Mount Elephant in the new Dragonfly which, he proudly said, was the first of its type seen east of Karachi.

Having registered the ‘baby airliner’ in Australia in September 1937, Fairbairn made it known that he intended to use it to fly between Melbourne and Canberra. Like his brother Osborne, Jim was one of the ‘old men’ of aviation, the flyers of the Great War, the pioneers and record breakers, the founders of airlines. Men who could scarcely imagine life without flying. Of his generation of RFC flyers, a British official had written in July 1916 that ‘the Australian temperament is specially suited to the flying service’.59 For them, accidents were vivid threads in the tapestry of flying life. And, of course, the veterans of the 1930s were not old men. Most — like Norman Brearley in Western Australia, Horrie Miller in Victoria, Hudson Fysh of Qantas, Murray Jones of de Havilland Australia, and Jim Fairbairn himself — were in their 40s. They had accepted, some might say embraced or even sought, the danger of the air all their adult lives. As Horrie Miller put it of the time he and a band of ex-AFC men launched a barnstorming business in Glenelg in 1919: ‘The general public still associated aircraft with death and disaster.’60 The general public were not wrong. But the flyers were undaunted. Oliver La Farge, a wartime staff officer in the U.S. Air Transport Command was to write of their American contemporaries: ‘The progress of their craft had been such that they had never lost the habit of doing things which until recently had been known to be impossible…They were ready for new conquests and strange developments, not in the far future, but tomorrow.’61

Jim Fairbairn never forgot the good fortune of his survival in 1917. His feelings were revealed in a brief intervention on the Repatriation Bill in 1934:

 Those of us who, after a month or two at the front, and a comparatively brief share of the strain imposed on the fighting forces, found our services terminated by injury, did not suffer the same nervous strain as those who, month after month, and year after year, escaped injury… the unfortunate individual who, though apparently bodily sound, has frayed nerves, and perhaps finds it necessary to take stimulants to steady them, experiences great difficulty in getting work, and is not regarded with understanding or sympathy.62

The speech might have referred to many of his flying contemporaries, not least to those with unrecognised afflictions, like that hero of the hour, Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith.

Fairbairn was not obsessed by the air. Nor did he depend on aviation for a living. Yet if flying was not his vocation it was certainly the passion of a man whose wealth, pastoral interests, business connections, and family traditions directed

62 CPD, House of Representatives, 1 Aug. 1934, p.1047.
him to a career of public service. It was a passion he shared not only with his brothers but with his sister Betty and brother-in-law and horse racing partner Ross Grey-Smith. The one person close to Fairbairn who was nervous about flying was his wife. As her niece Gillian Gubbins remembered, Peggy declined to accompany Jim on his regular trips from Mount Elephant to Essendon, preferring to be driven. But his interest was not merely that of an avid private flyer. ‘Jimmy’ Fairbairn, as Qantas’s Hudson Fysh—a slightly older Geelong Grammar contemporary—called him in correspondence with Imperial Airways associates, was acknowledged as an authority on aviation policy, both domestic and international. On his return from England in 1936, The Age had reported that he had seen the new flying boats to be used on the proposed imperial air mail service. Seizing the opportunity to offer his thoughts on policy, he had told the journalist that he favoured a five-year agreement, renewable for five years, rather than the 10-year agreement being mooted.

In a letter to his old school magazine, written while he was away, the young MP professed to have been shocked at the state of the meteorological station in Darwin—safety was being compromised by the government’s cheese-paring economies. In his public utterances it was rare for Fairbairn to venture beyond rural and aviation matters, where his expertise gave him some latitude to probe weaknesses and gaps in government policy. A notable exception was his adjournment motion in April 1936 on ‘the alarming growth of imports’ from the USA and the consequent ‘growing menace’ to trade with the United Kingdom and other ‘good customer nations’. The speech earned him the plaudits of Charles Hawker, who mocked the ministerial responses of Harry Gullett (Trade Negotiations) and Tommy White (Trade and Customs) who gave Fairbairn’s critique their blessing ‘with a sickly kind of sentiment designed to rob it of its vitality’. The exercise was a revelation that parliamentary badinage and byplay were not Fairbairn’s strong suit. This would not have surprised his former Hampden Council colleagues who had observed that he was capable and courteous but never had much to say. It was eight months before he returned to the fray. In a mild remonstrance at the trade diversion policy, he criticised the ‘unnecessary curtailment’ of trade with Japan compared with the far gentler treatment of the USA, ‘our most unsatisfactory customer’. This time, however, his touch was lighter. He had not noticed until May 22, he admitted, that he had moved his motion on April 1. And, following a slashing attack on Harry Gullett by the Country Party’s Archie Cameron, he confessed his disinclination to put pinches of salt in the minister’s claymore wounds.

63 Gillian Gubbins to CH, 8 Feb. 2009.
64 The Age, 5 Oct. 1936.
65 The Corian, Aug. 1936, p.175.
Gathering confidence session by session, year by year, Fairbairn was sufficiently satisfied with his performances in the House of Representatives to arrange for a friend, Eddie Connellan, to sit behind him any time when Parliament was in session.67 Never a polished speaker, and noted for a degree of personal reserve, the member for Flinders commanded respect as someone who seldom got to his feet unless he had something worthwhile to say. Such an occasion was his attempt to head off an Opposition attack on the government in December 1937 for its handling of a series of ‘Air Force Disasters’. In view of the damage being done to Australian aviation by the ‘extravagant publicity given in the press and in this House to aviation accidents and minor mishaps’, Fairbairn asked the Minister for Defence to make an appeal to ‘keep such publicity to something approaching proportion to that given to accidents associated with other forms of transport’. And, because of Labor attacks on the government’s Air Accidents Investigation Committee, would the Minister make a statement ‘explaining the very great difficulties that confront any committee that inquires into major air accidents’.

Unhappily the Minister’s statement provoked an adjournment motion in which the ‘black record’ of the RAAF — eight accidents in nine days — was contrasted unfavourably with civil aviation and motor accident rates. After listening to an hour of unrestrained criticism, Fairbairn rose to defend the government. It was ‘fantastic’ to call several of the accidents ‘serious’. Secret inquiries, to which Labor speakers objected, were more likely to yield candid answers. The latest modifications or servicing changes resulting from advice given in secret inquiries were promulgated in air regulations. Admitting that there was considerable controversy in air circles about whether inquiries should be open to the public, he was emphatic that ‘aviation would benefit to the greatest extent if the evidence were given in camera’. To the complaint that the interests of the public were not represented, he asserted that the rights of the public were protected by coronial investigations: ‘a coroner is as capable of carrying out an inquiry into an aircraft accident as any other’. A statement issued by Defence Minister H. C. Thorby two days later regarding ‘serious Air Force flying mishaps’ quoted ‘Mr. Fairbairn, M.P. (himself an airman)’ on ‘A Question of Proportion’.68 Proportionality was to be encouraged by officially characterising even fatal crashes as ‘mishaps’.

Useful as he had been to Thorby, unbeknown to many Fairbairn’s influence in aviation had been increased by the appointment of Geoff Street as Assistant Minister of Defence. The role he could play was evidenced late in October 1938 after the appalling crash into Mount Dandenong of the ANA DC-2 Kyeema in which his dear friend Charles Hawker perished with four crew and 13 other passengers,

---

67 Connellan, *Failure of Triumph*, p.84.
including the winemakers Tom Hardy, Hugo Gramp, and Sidney Hill Smith of Yalumba.\textsuperscript{69} Writing to Hudson Fysh, Hawker’s friend since their schooldays at Geelong Grammar, he sweetened an earlier feeler on behalf of the government:

This tragedy has certainly put the press and the public into a frame of mind to demand a clean-up of Civil Aviation which has been due for a long time. Things may happen, I think quickly. You will, of course, have realised when we were discussing the post of chairman of the Civil Aviation Board the other evening that I was pumping you to see whether there was any possibility of your being persuaded to take this job should a change be made.

I feel that I would like to know whether you would consider accepting the position if it should become vacant and be offered to you, and what conditions you would consider adequate. I think many senior members of Cabinet feel that this position should be very greatly increased in status.

Fysh was happy where he was. To the managing director of Qantas’s annoyance, the government then secretly sounded out his lieutenant, the Qantas flying operations manager, Lester Brain, who indicated without reference to his boss that he would accept the position should it be offered. It wasn’t.\textsuperscript{70} In due course the senior post in the reformed civil aviation regime went to Arthur B. Corbett, an engineer who was close to retirement as Deputy Director-General of Posts and Telegraphs in Queensland. Unencumbered by knowledge of aviation, ABC or ‘the Alphabetical Old Bastard’ as Corbett was known by staff, was to stay at the helm under successive ministers long enough to accumulate a litany of offences in the eyes of frustrated subordinates. Released in 1944 from the public service obligation to mute his political opinions, he became chairman of the provisional executive that formed the Liberal Party in Queensland.\textsuperscript{71}

When the Ministry of Civil Aviation was created late in November 1938 the Country Party’s H. C. Thorby, demoted from Defence where he was replaced by Geoff Street, was appointed as the first Minister. Fairbairn was not completely at one with his old friend on defence matters, believing that the government

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} The \textit{Canberra Times} reported on 14 Aug. 1940 that Fairbairn escaped death on this occasion because the Kyeema was delayed by fog and he therefore flew himself to Canberra. The story was repeated elsewhere (e.g. \textit{Lismore Advertiser}, 21 Aug. 1940). But, as the crash occurred before the plane reached Melbourne, Fairbairn could not have been on board.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Hudson Fysh, \textit{Qantas at War}, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1968, pp.75–6; John Gunn, \textit{The Defeat of Distance: Qantas 1919–1939}, UQP, St Lucia, 1985, pp.280–1, 334, 338, 343. Brain, perennially irritated at being under-appreciated by Fysh, had made clear his willingness to join Edgar Johnston, Controller-General of Civil Aviation, as his deputy as early as 1935. (Cameron Hazlehurst, ‘Brain, Lester Joseph [1903–1980]’, Ritchie and Cunneen (eds), \textit{Australian Dictionary of Biography}, vol. 13, pp.247–8).
\end{itemize}
had over-emphasised home defence over Imperial needs. But he was at pains to publicly congratulate Street on his appointment, ‘something for which I have hoped for many years’. Nor was he uncritical of British influence on Australian affairs. He lambasted the government for its ‘monstrously unfair’ public gloss on a report by Marshal of the RAF Sir Edward Ellington that purported to demonstrate poor training and discipline in the RAAF.

Although he was speaking at 3.30 a.m. to a sparse and somnolent House, his defence of the RAAF made headlines. Were it not for his reputation as an aviator, his customary loyalty to the government, and the presence of friends in high places, such an attack might have seriously damaged his political prospects. He was an advocate of national service — that was an issue still to be resolved — and of a commitment to reinforce Singapore in an emergency. He warned how easy it would be for an enemy to invade Western Australia or land a powerful force in Newcastle. And he was fertile with ideas about the training of Air Force pilots: if the RAAF could not manage enough cross-country flights then their pilots should be allowed to fly as assistant pilots on commercial airliners.

As it was, within months, following the death of Joe Lyons and the refusal of the Country Party to serve with the new Prime Minister, Bob Menzies, Jim Fairbairn’s moment came. The position of Civil Aviation Minister was vacant. No one in the UAP was better fitted to occupy the post. Harry Gullett had proposed him as ‘obviously the man for the job’ back in October 1938. Fairbairn did not have to ask.
