17. ‘A leaf falling off a tree’

Camouflaged though it was with aluminium-doped under-surfaces and regulation RAF dark earth-and-foliage green on the upper surfaces, the Hudson was easily seen by scores of people going about their business in Canberra, Queanbeyan, and the surrounding countryside. One of the first to catch sight of it was Corporal Mortimer G. Ewing, an RAAF fitter with 2A Survey Flight, who heard the motors at about 10.40, he said, and went outside the Officer Commanding’s former office at the aerodrome to see where it was coming from. He could see the aircraft arriving from the southeast at about 6000 feet. Moments later, Pilot Officer Raymond Winter, duty officer of the Survey Flight, saw the aircraft turn left — through approximately 110 degrees to port, he would tell a Service Court of Inquiry two days later — and complete a full circuit of the aerodrome, losing height gradually before continuing in another circuit.

Winter was an experienced civil pilot who had completed an RAAF flying course in May. Two weeks earlier he had successfully landed a twin-engined Wackett Gannet (A14-6), steering by motors after losing rudder control at 9000 feet and ordering his accompanying photographer to bail out. When asked by RAAF investigators about his observation of A16-97, Winter said he thought the pilot of the Hudson displayed above-average airmanship as he executed the circuits. Standing on the control tower veranda, Winter could see the machine turn into the wind about 500 feet above the hills and continue in ‘an apparently normal approach’ with undercarriage down. Having gathered his message pad to write out the message that the Hudson had arrived, he watched as the aircraft approached from the east then turned about 100 degrees to the left, losing height rapidly before disappearing behind the hills. The left wing appeared to be dropping: ‘the aircraft flicked down and the port wing continued to drop at an angle of 45 degrees’. The nose, he was sure, when asked later, had not dropped; nor had it gone up.

A less authoritative observer, Flight Sergeant Clifford Linton Smith, a storekeeper, had been standing at the permanent site of the ‘new’ aerodrome where hangars being erected for the RAAF were almost complete. Smith saw the aircraft approaching from the south, but took no more notice as it did a left-hand circuit until it was flying in an easterly direction ‘from where I was standing’. He had noticed that the landing gear was down but it did not seem as though the plane was likely to land. AC1 Henry House, a mess steward at No. 2

2 NAA: A705, 32/10/2696.
3 NAA: A705, 32/10/2729.
School of Technical Training, near the Kingston railway station some three miles southwest of the aerodrome, was sitting on the doorstep of the officers’ quarters at the school when he heard the aeroplane. He saw it, ‘very high’, heading in a northerly direction: ‘The engines were throttled back over the ’drome. It made a complete circuit of the ’drome and came back heading south. I did not see much because I was cleaning my shoes.’

Flying Officer Ronald Campbell Wilson, the 31-year-old station equipment officer, was walking towards his tent from the ante-room of the Officers’ Mess when he heard the noise of aircraft engines. Looking up, he too saw a Hudson about a mile south of the aerodrome going down wind in an easterly direction at the ‘usual height he had seen Lockheeds preparatory to landing’. He watched it for a moment or so, he told the Service Court of Inquiry on August 15. He was certain at the time that he noticed that ‘the machine wobbled but immediately became, what appeared to me, normal again’. A fortnight later, having looked at other Hudsons approaching in an almost identical fashion, he thought that ‘it might have been a trick of the sun’. Wilson was called, and the call took his attention away from the aircraft.

‘Is he doing aerobatics?’

At Parliament House, watching from a window in the office of the Minister for the Army, the minister’s staff also saw the aircraft in the eastern sky. Later that day someone remembered Geoff Street’s private secretary, Percy ‘Pip’ Hayter, saying ‘The Brigadier will soon be here.’ The plane circled and disappeared from sight.4 At 10.49, wireless operator Jack Palmer sent the signal ‘QAL’ — ‘I am landing.’ ‘Ground wind west 10 to 15’, was the response from Leonard de Leuil, the wireless operator at Canberra aerodrome. The message was repeated. Then, with a hint of concern that there was no acknowledgement, de Leuil asked: ‘Did you want wind?’ Half a minute later VMZAY responded but the signal was in de Leuil’s words, ‘jammed out’. De Leuil tried again at 10.50: ‘Did you get the wind OK?’5

Elsewhere, at Canberra aerodrome most civilian workers, and airmen like Flight Sergeant Smith, were paying little heed to the sound of another incoming aircraft. The RAAF’s No. 8 Squadron had been established at Canberra in August 1939. A year later, plans to transfer the aerodrome from civil to military

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4 *The Herald*, 13 Aug. 1940.
5 Feature articles by ill-informed writers 30 or 40 years later sometimes assumed that radio contact was actually by voice. ‘The pilot’s voice was almost blasé as he reported “I am landing.”’ (*The Observer* [Gladstone], 21 Dec. 1972).
control had yet to come into force. An RAAF station had been opened formally at the beginning of April 1940 under the temporary command of Squadron Leader Paddy Heffernan. But for the first few months the Air Force had to make do with an orderly room in the civil aerodrome administrative building. The protracted coal strike and consequent shortage of steel meant that buildings and hangars took longer to finish. Airmen and junior officers required to sleep on the base were accommodated in tents. The Chief of the Air Staff had personally intervened to order the provision of five blankets per man, covering the issue with a medical certificate to the effect that it was essential.

A civilian, Sydney Rhodes, was the senior attendant in charge of the aerodrome. It was customary for him to watch approaching aircraft and to have the only ‘crash equipment truck ready for any emergency’. Rhodes was standing outside the original hangar — a large structure, diagonally opposite the RAAF hangars, completed in 1936 — and watching the Hudson approach now from the northwest; it was about 10 miles away, he thought, at 3000 feet or 4800 feet above sea level. Asked 13 days later by counsel assisting the Coroner if he was competent to judge the height of the aircraft, Rhodes said he had been connected with flying for some time. ‘We sometimes have competitions at the aerodrome to gauge the height of planes.’ To lend further authority to his testimony, he prefaced his evidence by stating that his employer was ‘Mr C. S. Daley’, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Interior, the most senior Canberra administrator and colleague of the Coroner on the Federal Capital Territory Advisory Council. Fortunately, he had nothing to lose; he may have been unaware that the Coroner blamed Charles Daley for a severe professional humiliation earlier in their careers.

On August 14 Rhodes described what he had seen to Commonwealth Police Sergeant Ivan Perriman of the Acton Police Station:

The plane made one complete circle of the aerodrome, and the half-circle which brought the plane from a south-easterly direction preparatory to landing into a north-westerly breeze. I saw the plane approaching the hill closest to the drome, and it appeared to me to have then lost unusual height for landing, but I thought it would clear the hill. The next thing I saw was the plane appearing to make what I thought was a right hand turn. It then disappeared from my view behind the hill.

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7 Sydney Morning Herald, 27 Aug. 1940.
Pilot Officer Winter, seeing the Hudson again, had noticed its left wing down for a second or two. The aircraft appeared to be straightening for approach when the left wing dropped, rapidly at first and then more slowly until it reached an angle of 45 degrees before he lost sight of it. Winter observed that the undercarriage was down but could not say if the flaps were down — he would say later that from that distance it would be hard to judge if the flaps were down. Sydney Rhodes was sure they were not. But Corporal Ewing, recalling the aircraft as he saw it about two-thirds of the way around its second circuit with its engines running normally and wheels coming down, thought he remembered seeing the flaps down. At that time the Hudson was about 500 feet above ground, by his estimate, 200 feet above the hill. Winter had by then gone inside to get a pad to write out the routine arrival message.

About a mile and a half from Queanbeyan on a high point of the road some 300 yards east of the railway station, with a clear view of the Sutton Valley and surrounding hills, F. A. Tetley, a garage proprietor, and his assistant, Lawrence O’Brien, were pushing a truck into the garage when they heard aircraft engines. A few hours later, they told journalists that they looked up and were struck with how low the aircraft appeared to be. ‘Ah boss,’ Fred Tetley’s assistant said, ‘look at this fellow — he’s stunting low.’ They watched as it flew on north of them towards the hills across the Sutton Valley about two miles away. O’Brien estimated that it turned about 200 degrees before it ‘slipped sideways to the right’ while at the same time the left wing went down. ‘Young’ O’Brien, as The Examiner called him on August 14, was under the impression that the aircraft had just taken off and was circling to gain height. It appeared to be making a circuit to the left when ‘the left wing dipped suddenly and the machine dropped height rapidly’. It dropped nose first into a stall, making two ‘corkscrew-like spirals’. The two men gazed in horror as the machine went into the ground among trees. They heard no noise but saw it at once burst into flame. As a column of black smoke then began to rise — it went to 100 feet, they thought — Tetley telephoned the Queanbeyan police and gave them directions to the site.

Meanwhile, mess steward Henry House, his shoe cleaning completed, had looked up again and saw the plane heading north, ‘just a little over the height of the hills from where I was, almost directly in front of me’. House would say later that he thought ‘it was too low if it were going to land’. He noticed the aircraft nose dip ‘and it gave a couple of spins’ before passing from his view. James Mathews, leading cook at the Royal Australian Navy’s Harman Naval Wireless Station, was looking out of his window to the east when he saw ‘a large aeroplane falling straight to the ground’. Speaking to Senior Constable R.

9 In at least one account they were pushing a car out of the garage.
10 Unless otherwise indicated the eye-witness accounts are derived from statements to the Commonwealth Police (NAA: A1378, P8903) and subsequent testimony to the Coronial Inquest, the Service Court of Inquiry, or the Air Court of Inquiry.
S. Brodribb the next day, he estimated that he was some three or four miles from the crash site. He had not seen the aircraft before he noticed it falling. He could not hear its engines; but he saw it burst into flames. There had been no smoke or flames visible before the impact. Closer to the scene than Mathews were Dudley Lalor, a carpenter by trade and Canberra manager of Victorian construction contractors, J. L. Simmie & Co., and his foreman plasterer, Jack Tilyard. The Simmie company was working on erecting the hangars at the aerodrome as well as on the construction of the Australian War Memorial, having completed several important Canberra projects including the Albert Hall and Manuka's Capitol Theatre. Lalor and Tilyard were driving to the aerodrome from a job in Queanbeyan. As they came down the hill approaching the bridge crossing the Molonglo River on the Sutton Road — not the main Canberra–Queanbeyan road — they noticed the aircraft about three-quarters of a mile ahead. It flew easterly across the Canberra–Queanbeyan road about a mile and a quarter from the aerodrome. They could see that the wheels were down but could not hear the engines. They said the aircraft turned to the left ‘at a steep angle and went into a spiral dive’. The Age ‘special representative’ reported next day that ‘Mr Lalor involuntarily shouted a warning’. ‘I pulled up the car with a jerk,’ he told other journalists, ‘and yelled, “Look Tilyard! He'll never make it.” Tilyard replied, “My God, no. He's got no chance.”’

Speaking to Sergeant Perriman on August 14 Lalor described the plane hitting the ground ‘as though it were landing’. Thinking about it a day later, Lalor reiterated that he saw the machine turning left in a northerly direction and the left wing dropping. The aircraft then turned completely over, he said, in a rolling movement with the nose down. The aircraft was at an angle of about 45 degrees when it hit the ground. That was how he remembered it 13 days later for the Coroner. Launceston and Perth readers had seen a more graphic account in The Examiner and the Western Mail on August 14:

The whole ghastly business happened right before my eyes. A few feet from the ground the plane appeared to pull slightly out of the stall and, instead of nosing into the ground, it struck at a shallow angle. The machine caught fire immediately, but Mr Lalor was emphatic that there was no explosion.

As Lalor and Tilyard ran up the hill across the paddock to see if they could help ‘there was a sudden burst of intense flame, and a dull explosion was apparent from one of the petrol tanks’. By then, RAAF men who had passed them in a ‘lorry’ were at the scene. Lalor got as close as he could to the plane but the

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11 Simmie & Co. were about to discover that they had been operating in Canberra without fulfilling the registration requirements as a ‘foreign company’ and were liable to a fine of £5 a day since October 1935. After apologies, no fine was imposed (NAA: A432, 1940/651).

12 The Examiner, The Western Mail, The Age, 14 Aug. 1940.
servicemen declined his offer of assistance; and he and Tilyard were soon ushered behind a cordon of NCOs and lower ranks that Corporal Ewing and Flight Sergeant Smith, under Flying Officer Wilson’s orders, had established 150 yards away from the burning wreckage.

Unbeknown to the Simmie managers, one of their employees had a different vantage point. A young bricklayer, Bob McJannett, working on the hangar roof at the aerodrome, would recall 67 years later:

I always liken it to a leaf falling off a tree…

I think there was a wee bit of pilot error inasmuch as he possibly misjudged the speed of the wind for a start and then he banked too sharply which meant that he had more wind force up against him when he put the nose [down]…He actually didn’t get right around. He got about halfway round you see, that’s when the wind hit him…it just sort of spiralled down.

McJannett had the same reaction as Lawrence O’Brien: ‘I said to myself what a stupid height to be stunting. And it was only when he disappeared I thought God, he’s crashing and next thing this huge big cloud of black smoke came up.’

John Power, a railway goods clerk, was standing at the door of the office at Queanbeyan railway station when he saw the Hudson flying from Canberra ‘fairly low in a normal fashion’. There was nothing about it to hold his attention, he told the Service Court on August 15. The engines sounded normal. It turned west towards the aerodrome just as he moved inside to answer the telephone. D. R. Vest, 42-year-old managing agent of the Texas Oil Company, was at the goods shed at the station. He told the Coroner that he saw the plane heading towards ‘heavily timbered country’ on course for the aerodrome. Then, he thought, it made two turns to the left, apparently getting into trouble on the second turn. Earlier he had told newspaper reporters and the Service Court that there was a large piece of cleared ground between the plane and Queanbeyan; and he thought the pilot was making for this ground for a forced landing. But before getting there the pilot suddenly took a turn to the left. He seemed to lose control. ‘The wing dipped first to the right and then to the left and the whole plane zig-zagged until it hit the ground in a pancake landing. It struck the ground heavily and immediately afterwards burst into flames.’ In a signed statement for the Coroner Vest said: ‘I did see it hit the ground.’

Darcy Vest, like several of the eye-witnesses, would have to tell his story at least three times over the next two weeks as the Coroner, the RAAF, and the

government all urgently mounted inquiries. Speaking to the Service Court of Inquiry, he said that when he saw the aircraft it was about a mile and a half from the aerodrome and 400 to 500 feet up. He visualised that if it continued it would crash into the thickly timbered hill between it and the aerodrome. Interviewed by reporters only hours after the crash, Vest had given a more detailed narrative of what he saw and heard:

I heard the motors running perfectly, and watched the machine for about a mile as it glided over the hills 400 or 500 feet up and heading for the aerodrome...when I first saw the machine it was under perfect control, and the motors were running. The pilot throttled them back, and just after he did I noticed that although still gliding stably the aeroplane was losing height much more rapidly than is usual when machines approach the landing ground from that quarter. As I watched, I realised that although still headed for the aerodrome the machine would not clear the last of the hills in its path if it continued its quick descent. The pilot must have realised this simultaneously. To his left, on the timbered hillside, there was a big bare patch of ground.

Suddenly, as the machine continued to sink rapidly, it made a quarter-turn to the left, flying towards me and still dropping steadily. It made another quarter-turn to the left, and seemed to head for the bare patch. Vest kept the aircraft in view and, as the turn was completed, ‘it seemed to waver and wobble, when the nose fell and the machine drove in a corkscrew spiral into the ground, striking it’, one journalist quoted him as saying, ‘almost vertically’. That was one version. To RAAF officers convened on August 15, Vest was recorded as testifying: ‘The plane did not then dive spirally into the ground but went in on a more or less flat turn. The plane hit the ground at an angle of 30 to 40 degrees.’ A few minutes later he spoke of a ‘spiral dive to the ground’. In fact, Vest had lost sight of the aircraft before it hit the ground though he saw immediately afterwards ‘a bright flame flash above the hilltops and then dense clouds of smoke billowed up from the wreck’. Vest had seen enough to know that urgent action was necessary if there was to be any hope for whoever was in the aircraft. John Power ‘heard Mr Vest call out something about the plane’. Vest went inside the goods shed office and asked the clerk to ring the aerodrome, ambulance, and fire brigade. Some seconds later, with a small group congregated on the railway platform staring at the dense column of black smoke, Vest heard ‘a loud report’. The same ‘explosion...much fiercer’ than the first noise he noted, was heard as far away as Harman naval base by

15 The Daily Telegraph report (14 Aug. 1940), in nearly identical words, does not include the phrase ‘almost vertically’.

16 The Mercury, 14 Aug. 1940.
James Mathews. Vest did not immediately go out to the site although he would tell Queanbeyan Police Constable Harold Sheldrick later in the day that when the plane hit the ground it stopped where it crashed.17

Much closer to the aircraft, as it did a left turn northwards towards the aerodrome, was 55-year-old Harry Southwell. Working in his pioneer family’s Queanbeyan market garden within view of the aerodrome, Southwell saw the left wing drop ‘and the aircraft appeared to roll over on to its back and the nose went down’. He lost sight of it as it dived towards the ground about three-quarters of a mile away. ‘Instantaneously there was a loud explosion and a sheet of flame went up.’ ‘Did the engines of the aircraft appear to you to be functioning normally?’ he was asked soon afterwards at the Service Court. ‘Yes up to the time the aircraft rolled over, then as the nose went down the engines appeared to roar.’ Dairy farmer Hilton Clothier, out in a paddock fencing with his 16-year-old son Geoffrey, looked up to see an aircraft coming from the west. Clothier’s observation from his Queanbeyan River property ‘Hazelbrook’ on the Oaks estate was similar to Southwell’s. He watched the plane flying east about two miles away until it came at about 800 feet to within 800 yards of where he was. As it reached ‘the junction of the Queanbeyan, Yass, and Queanbeyan Sutton road’ it turned to the north covering a radius of about a mile. Clothier noted that as the plane lost height, the left wing dipped to an angle of 45 degrees. Then, he thought, it seemed to right itself and go about 30 degrees the other way. There was a fairly stiff westerly breeze blowing, he told the Service Court, and ‘just at that point I heard the noise of an engine crackle as though it was trying to pick up. Simultaneously the nose went down and then I saw the plane dive towards the ground.’ Correcting himself Clothier went on:

It was not really a dive but it was a sort of skid with the nose down and half slipping around to the left at the same time…

It went from my view behind a clump of trees. When the crackle started as those engines were trying to pick up I saw flames coming from the right wing.18

Clothier alone reported seeing flames while the plane was in the air. Two other witnesses, John Castle and his 10-year-old son, saw the final seconds. Castle, a Sydney real estate agent and auctioneer, had been driving close to Queanbeyan and was about to return to Sydney. In the next day’s Daily Telegraph, alongside photographs of ‘Mr John Castle’ and ‘John Castle Jr’, their story was prominent:

17 NAA: A1378, P8903.
18 Hilton Clothier had been a wool classer with New Zealand Loan and Mercantile, then a wool and skin buyer, before starting a five-pen dairy after bankruptcy in 1937 (Karen Williams, Oaks Estate: No Man’s Land, 1997, p.151). I am grateful to Raphael Clothier, Hilton Clothier’s eldest son, and Max Hill, who as a youth on his father’s commercial vegetable garden saw A16-97 making a circuit over the aerodrome, for information about the Clothier family and Harry Southwell (telephone interviews, 5 Feb., 21 Jan. 2011).
The plane was pulled out of three slips before it made a final half-roll and crashed.

John asked, ‘Is he doing aerobatics?’ and I replied, ‘No, he’s too low; he’s in trouble.’

The big plane slipped to one side, and the pilot pulled it out — only to slip to the other.

That happened three times, and it then did a half-roll.

John called out, ‘Look you can see the cabin windows,’ as it did.

It slid from sight just behind the low hills in front of us, and there was an immediate sheet of flame.

It must have been an inferno. Black smoke followed when the flames got to the oil tanks.

It was no use my rushing to it. Nobody could have lived in that flame.

What impressed me were the desperate attempts the pilot made to get out of trouble.

He was like a car driver trying to pull a car out of a bad skid.

The race to the site

When the aircraft disappeared from the sight of those at the aerodrome and billowing dark smoke appeared, Flying Officer Winter asked Flying Officer Stanley Willmott, a special-duties officer, to get in touch with the Air Board. Winter ordered the despatch of the fire tender and ambulance and two crash parties before following in an official car. Flight Sergeant Smith went out to the ‘main Air Force road and procured a tender’, the station’s crash-emergency vehicle that was passing, and set off for the site. He would reach the burning wreckage — about one and three-quarter miles southeast from the landing ground — in about five or six minutes, a few seconds after the RAAF ambulance.
The crash location marked for the Coroner on a ‘Federal Territory feature map’ published by the Department of Home Affairs
(Courtesy of the ACT Coroner’s Office)
Flying Officer Ronald Wilson heard somebody cry ‘Ambulance, fire tender, the Lockheed has nosed in.’ Wilson rushed over and jumped into the ambulance with Sergeant W. H. Galvin, the medical orderly sergeant, who had gathered his first-aid kit and already started the engine. Galvin drove along the Queanbeyan road and turned into a paddock to get closer to the aircraft which had come down in Duncan Cameron’s ‘Dundee’, an 888-acre hilly grazing property about two miles north of Queanbeyan on the ACT border.19

The RAAF rescuers had to proceed on foot, running through the scrubbed hillside paddocks, dotted with stumps, to reach the smoking wreckage. Winter got there ‘immediately after the fire ambulance and ahead of the crash party’ he had despatched. Just ahead of him, Wilson claimed to be the first man on the scene, noting that his time of arrival was three minutes past eleven (he checked his watch with ‘wireless time’ at 1.00 p.m.). Wilson would tell the ACT Coroner 13 days later:

When I arrived the machine was on fire. One part far more than the other. The fuselage had practically finished burning. The starboard wing was only just burning. It was burning very quietly. It wasn’t a big blaze at all. The tail fin and rudder were not burning. The port wing and the nose were burning very fiercely.

The aircraft, evidently coaxed into a trajectory of 40 to 45 degrees for a crash landing, had come to a sudden halt on impact with a log — described in some reports as a stunted tree — some two and a half feet in diameter and 15 feet long. Rather than travelling forward, the plane had bounced back about two or three feet, and the engines were embedded in the ground. Sparks had ignited vapour and fuel from a ruptured tank. The wind blowing from the west was pushing the flames toward the nose of the plane, which was oriented north of east. So fierce was the blaze that the young Daily Telegraph journalist, Alan Reid, who went out to the scene, saw that grass was burned and the earth scorched for a radius of 50 feet around the wreckage. A tree 100 feet ahead of the nose was also scorched. Flight Sergeant Smith realised that there was little he could do with the extinguisher he had taken from the ambulance. He told the Coroner the next day that he had ‘played it on the bodies mostly. It was not very successful.’ Another day later, talking in camera to the Service Court, both he and his superior, Ronald Wilson, were more emphatic: the RAAF extinguishers were ‘hopeless’. There was no alternative but to wait for the fire brigade.

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19 Block 60 Gungahlin District, Crown lease granted to D. A. Cameron in 1936, was subsequently disposed of to W. A. Taylor (Sharon Priestly, ACT Place Names Officer, to CH, 8 Sept. 2011).
Neither Smith nor Wilson made mention of arriving to see a white-haired local farmer, Jack Butt, and his 15-year-old son Bill, ‘attacking the aircraft with axes’, and ordering them away. Butt, who lived in Queanbeyan, had leased a 298-acre soldier settlement block (102C), much of which had been reclaimed by the Department of the Interior in 1936 to expand Canberra’s landing ground; he had been given in exchange a site on the edge of the nearby hills on which he ran sheep. 20 He also share-farmed with Duncan Cameron, about a mile closer to Queanbeyan. He was ploughing in Cameron’s paddock when he heard an aircraft in trouble. As he would tell his family, when he saw the flames and smoke he rushed to the scene in his truck. He would later tell Jo Gullett of his distress at being prevented from trying to save several men whom he believed were still alive. He had pleaded with an RAAF officer to try to pull away the lightly burning starboard wing, but was told nothing could be done. As his

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20 Agistment of sheep on the aerodrome was permitted, a drover being required when mail planes were due, as late as 1938 when the Canberra Aero Club plane struck a stray on landing (Canberra Times, 1 Aug. 1938).
youngest daughter, Edna Byrne, would recall 73 years later, the sight of men ‘panicking at the windows’ as they were engulfed by flames would haunt her father for life.\textsuperscript{21}

Butt’s name appears nowhere in contemporary press accounts or official records of the crash investigations. The story remembered by his family and by Jo Gullett, who wrote of it privately in 1972, is dramatically at odds with the sworn testimony of the RAAF officers and men at the scene. Jo Gullett told the story to Lord Casey in 1972 and apparently to no-one else.\textsuperscript{22} Did Butt or his son tell anyone other than Jo Gullett that they had seen men alive in the crashed aircraft? Were they disbelieved, purposely ignored by the authorities, encouraged to keep silent? Or had they just convinced themselves that no good would come of talking about it? There are no answers to these puzzling questions. Jack Butt, an AIF returned serviceman, a stalwart of the pastoral and agricultural association, was a respected figure in the local community. Perhaps, when it was obvious there was nothing they could do, he and his son simply went back down the hill and returned to their ploughing, somehow escaping the notice of the police.

Jack Butt and his son were not the only men to reach the scene moments after the crash. A young truck driver and well-known local rugby league player, Les McIntyre, on his way from collecting brickies sand, had also been close by. He had run to the aircraft, too late to do anything other than gaze at the burning wreckage. It was a sight that haunted Les McIntyre. His son, John McIntyre, would recall his father’s memories of helplessness, often waking in the night long afterwards.\textsuperscript{23}

It was no puzzle that the plane had burned so quickly. There were two fuel tanks in each wing centre section of the Hudson. They were directly above the undercarriage struts, rendering them liable to rupture with a heavy landing or broken undercarriage. The tanks were integral tanks — the actual wing structure was sealed to contain the fuel. The capacity of the front tanks was 125 imperial gallons; those in the rear each held 143 gallons. CO\textsubscript{2} extinguishers were fitted on the firewall behind the engine accessory section (between the engine and the fuel tank).\textsuperscript{24} With a full fuel load of 536 gallons on take-off from Laverton it is likely that there would have been well over 400 gallons remaining when the plane hit the ground. It was bad enough that the tanks had been only minimally depleted by the trip. Worse was that the Hudson, like all Australian military aircraft, did

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] Edna Byrne, telephone interview, 26 March 2013; interview with Alex Sloan, 666 ABC Canberra, 25 March 2013. Mrs Byrne recalled being taken to the crash site a day or two later, walking though white ash, and discovering a clump of coins melted together.
\item[22] Jo Gullett to Lord Casey, 7 Oct. 1972, NAA: M1129, WHITE/C B.
\item[24] Ron Cuskelly to CH, 14 Nov. 1978.
\end{footnotes}
not have self-sealing tanks. Both the British Air Ministry and the RAAF had been unhappy to learn in January 1940 that no satisfactory way had been found to modify the Lockheed aircraft’s integral tanks. Jim Fairbairn, who had been intrigued by the self-sealing tanks of a downed German Dornier bomber on an RAF station in France, had called for a report on them just two months earlier. What further accentuated the conflagration was the high magnesium content in the metal skin of the plane.25

As the senior Air Force officer present at the wreckage, Flying Officer Wilson took charge and told men to search in front of the plane in case anyone had been thrown clear. One unnamed ‘rescuer’ was quoted the next day in the Daily Telegraph as saying: ‘From the position of the bodies it appeared that they knew the crash was inevitable. They were grouped together, as though the victims had risen from their seats and made for the door of the plane.’ This was not the testimony of any of the witnesses who went on the record that day and later. Wilson said he had seen four bodies in the wreckage ‘already not recognisable’ but knew there must be more. None had been found at the front. Smith had seen three bodies at first. One was at the rear on the ground near a gap where the exit door should have been; the door itself, detached and lying 10 to 15 yards behind the tail, was severely dented. Smith thought that the door might have been released from the inside. Two bodies were on the port side, two yards closer to the nose. The fuselage had been consumed by the fire and the bodies had just fallen through. Following a mild explosion, another body fell out near the port engine. As Wilson, Smith, and the others took in the horror of the scene, the RAAF tender and ambulance were rapidly joined by the airport crash-emergency vehicle. Flight Lieutenant Lloyd Law of the Survey Flight at the aerodrome reached them at 11.10 a.m. and departed almost immediately, leaving Wilson in charge.

Arriving in his own car shortly after the fire tender, ambulance, and two tenders which he had despatched, Pilot Officer Richard Winter, the duty pilot of the Survey Flight, ordered the airmen to empty their extinguishers on the bodies. Winter put on an asbestos helmet and gloves — there were no asbestos suits available — and moved the port wheel and undercarriage leg away from the bodies. There was nothing more they could do, he would tell the Service Court of Inquiry, until the Canberra Fire Brigade arrived. The Queanbeyan police were even less able to help. Alerted by the garage proprietor Fred Tetley, Sergeant

L. J. Warburton drove a motor truck with Constable Harold Sheldrick to the crash site, finding the aircraft enveloped in flames. The two policemen said they could see men hunched forward in their seats but could not reach them because of the heat. Outside the machine, scorched but neatly folded parachutes lay among ‘charred and smouldering clothing…mixed up with tools, the remains of seats and fixtures, twisted pieces of metal’, burnt cameras, suitcases, and other personal belongings.26

Although smoke was visible almost immediately after the aircraft itself vanished from view, there was no way of knowing from the airport control tower whether there were survivors. While Sydney Rhodes was racing from the civil aviation hangar in the aerodrome’s ‘crash equipment car’ in the direction of the burning aircraft a call was made to the Canberra Community Hospital for medical staff to be alerted. Nurses were told to prepare 10 beds, only to learn soon afterwards that they would not be needed. Dr Lew Nott had been collected by police from his nearby property but quickly realised that there was nothing he could do for the victims.27 Others whose duty called them were converging on ‘Dundee’, Duncan Cameron’s Majura farm. Monsignor Patrick Haydon, Canberra’s first parish priest and confidant of ministers and officials, was hurrying to offer or administer the last rites. Police too were on the way. Senior Sergeant Bailey of the Commonwealth Police was despatched to the scene, followed an hour or so afterwards by his chief, Colonel H. E. Jones. Bailey arranged to return with the ‘Deputy Coroner’ to view the crash site and inspect the bodies.28

Whatever the fate of the men on the aircraft, ambulances and fire-fighting equipment would still be required. Since 1935 the Canberra ambulance service had been co-located with the fire brigade though it was soon under the administrative control of the newly formed hospital board. There had never been an exercise to test systems for co-ordinating RAAF and civilian emergency responses. There was no direct telephone line from the sprinkler installations at the aerodrome to the fire brigade headquarters. But the delay this day was minimal. The hospital telephoned the fire brigade. As the brigade ‘daily occurrence register’ records, the phone message at 10.58 on the morning of August 13 advised of an aeroplane crash on Queanbeyan Rd near Harman wireless station. A fire appliance and an ambulance were requested.

The Canberra Fire and Ambulance Service had one fire appliance and six officers who were on a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week roster. Fire officers with first-aid certificates could be rostered alternately for ambulance duties. For this they would wear white dust-coats and special caps and would earn an extra allowance

27 Tink, Air Disaster, p.178; Canberra Times, 6 May 2013.
28 Commonwealth Police File, NAA: A1378, 4 P8903. The ‘deputy coroner’ is not identified but presumably this was a reference to ‘Colonel’ John Goodwin described elsewhere as Acting Coroner.
of five shillings. Station Officer Bill Maloney was in charge at the new Forrest fire station in Empire Circuit when the telephone call came from Canberra Hospital. As it happened, the No. 1 ambulance, a Buick bought 16 months previously, with officers Harold Stephenson and Tom Hynes on board, was already on its way to the hospital after a call received about 20 minutes earlier. So a message was left for them to drive to the aeroplane accident at ‘Pialligo aerodrome’ as soon as they could. The station fire-alarm bell was sounded by watch officer C. Lomax. Billy Stewart, the rostered driver, and Lomax’s son-in-law Jim Kearney, a professional rugby league player recently added to the crew, jumped on board the Dennis fire engine with Maloney. Extra chemical extinguishers were stowed; and the fire crew headed off through the Royal Military College to the Queanbeyan–Yass road, then turned up the Sutton road.

Almost as soon as they left the station the firemen saw smoke and realised that they had been given the wrong directions. Knowing the area well, they lost no time, and about a mile and a half along a gravel section of the Sutton road — deemed by the Department of the Interior to be in ‘trafficable order’ — they decided to divert through the bush. Using wire cutters they forced their way through a fence. ‘We just followed the smoke’, Maloney remembered. Meanwhile, Officer M. O’Brien was called in from leave and told to take the station’s reserve ambulance, its superseded ‘Austin appliance’, to the scene of the accident. He did not make it, returning after 40 minutes with gearbox trouble. The Austin had been prone to breakdown for years, and could manage only 15 miles an hour when climbing Canberra’s ‘mild slopes’ in third gear.29

When they arrived at what Maloney described in a police statement next day as ‘Cameron’s paddock’, the fire crew found the nose of the aircraft in the ground, the left wing completely burnt, the right wing and tail in the air, the small wheel on the ground partly burnt. They approached the plane at once with five soda/acid and two pyrofoam extinguishers as well as water. Watching as the firemen moved forward, Flying Officer Wilson made a note of the time they arrived, and instructed Sergeant Charles Oscar Bueno, a storekeeper at No. 2 School of Technical Training, who was with him, to do the same. Police Sergeant Ivan Perriman took Bueno’s statement the next day, when he said it was 11.24 a.m. The Queanbeyan brigade reached them at 11.33, three minutes after the first four bodies had been placed in the RAAF ambulance. It was another half-hour before the remaining bodies were taken from the wreckage.

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29 Interviews W. Maloney, 15 July 1977; J. Kearney, 23 July 1977; Canberra Fire Station, Canberra Fire Brigade Daily Occurrence Register, Canberra Fire and Emergency Services Museum, formerly held in Australian Archives at CRS A3328; ‘Inquisition before a Coroner Sitting Alone’, 26 Aug. 1940, Canberra Coroners’ Court Papers; Sec. & Exec. Officer, Bd of Fire Commissioners of NSW to Sec., Dept of Interior, 16 April 1941, NAA: A659, 41/1/151; ‘Queanbeyan-Sutton Road…’, NAA: A292, C8738; Arthur Ide, Royal Canberra Hospital: An account of its origins and development; The first forty years, 1914 to 1954, Arthur Ide, Canberra, 1994, pp.209–10.
16th August, 1940.

Report of Station Officer W. Maloney.

To Chief Officer, Canberra Fire Brigade.

Relative to Aeroplane crash on 13.8.40.

Sir,

I have to report that in response to a telephone call from the Canberra Hospital at 11.58 am on 13.8.40 for an aeroplane crash on "Queenstown Road near Narooma Wireless Station" I immediately stowed the "Dennis" appliance with extra chemical extinguishers and turned out.

Shortly after leaving the station smoke from the crash could be seen and it was noted that the wrong direction had been given. However, as the locality is well known to the brigade no time was lost through this cause. The route taken was through Royal Military College to Queanbeyan/Innes Road thence along the Sutton Road. Approximately one and one half miles along this road fencing wire was pulled down and the appliance travelled across country about one mile to the scene.

Upon arrival the fire was attacked with soda/acid and pyrofoam extinguishers and at the same time the work of removing the bodies was commenced, the first body being taken out in about one minute of commencing operations. Working from the rear, or tail, of the plane each body was removed as the fire was being extinguished. When seven extinguishers had been used, six bodies had been recovered. The Queanbeyan Fire Brigade then arrived with two chemicals and with these were enabled to recover one more body. All available extinguishers were then used up and the empty cylinders were taken by R.A.A.F. tender to creek for refilling with water to enable them to be recharged.

Before these returned, however, the three remaining bodies, in the nose of the plane, had been recovered.

I personally took command of the situation and directed all operations which included the fire, recovery of bodies, covering of same and their subsequent removal to the mortuary. Our work being completed I advised the R.A.A.F. officers present that we would return to the Station. A military guard was then put over the crash.

From observations it was noted that until arrival of the Brigade no attempt was made to either fight the fire or remove the occupants of the plane; it would appear that adequate equipment for dealing with such a situation was not available by the R.A.A.F., or, if it was available, no attempt was made to use it either before or after the arrival of the Brigade.

The call to the Brigade was not a direct one, it having come via the Canberra Hospital.

The Brigade returned to the station at 15.37 p.m.

Station Officer
Canberra Fire Brigade.

Fire Brigade Station Officer Maloney reports to his chief, 14 August 1940

(ACT Fire Brigade archives, courtesy of Drew McLean)
Wilson observed that the firemen applied extinguishers where bodies could be seen between the nose and the port engine. Maloney’s testimony to the Coroner 13 days later summarised the desperate but unavailing efforts that followed:

The bodies were lying in the debris with the debris of the fuselage on the ground. I took one body out from the tail of the plane. We worked along the tail and removed the bodies as we worked along towards the nose of the plane. The first body was removed a minute or so after commencing operations. We continued to work extinguishing the fire. There were two bodies lying side by side held in by the framework of the seats. We pulled the wire work off the cushions and removed two bodies from there. We worked further forward extinguishing the fire and more bodies were removed. In the nose of the plane there were three bodies. They were removed last.30

Bill Maloney had reported on August 14 to the Chief Officer Percy Douglas:

When seven extinguishers had been used, six bodies had been recovered. The Queanbeyan Fire Brigade then arrived with two chemical extinguishers and with these we were enabled to recover one more body. All available extinguishers were then used up and the empty cylinders were taken by R.A.A.F. tender to [a nearby] creek for refilling with water to enable them to be recharged.

Before these returned, however, the three remaining bodies, in the nose of the plane, had been recovered.

Maloney’s reiterated reference to three bodies in the nose of the plane appears to be inconsistent with the second of two drawings made the same day by Flying Officer Wilson for Police Sergeant Perriman. The Wilson drawing has marks representing two bodies in the nose and a third on the ground between the nose and the port engine. It also shows three more marks on the port wing. Curiously, in none of Wilson’s statements — to the Coroner, to two policemen, to the Service Court or the Air Court — did he say explicitly that he saw two bodies in the nose. To the Service Court, for example, he said: ‘When the blaze in the nose and along the port wing had subsided somewhat I saw more bodies, and as soon as it was possible these were taken from the crash. They totalled six…The six mentioned were all taken from the position between the nose and the port engine.’

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30 Tink (Air Disaster, p.10), quoting from the Canberra Times report, 27 Aug. 1940, has Maloney accounting for one body in the tail, three in the nose, ‘with the remaining six “in pairs on the coiled springs of the burnt seats”’. The newspaper paraphrase of Maloney’s testimony said ‘the others’, not ‘six’. The Inquest verbatim transcript, however, refers only to two bodies being removed from the framework of the seats.
Flying Officer Wilson sketches where he thought bodies were
(Commonwealth Police file P8903, NAA: A1378)

Station Officer Maloney’s typed report is explicit that he had personally taken charge of the situation at the site and ‘directed all operations which included the fire, recovery of bodies, covering of same and their subsequent removal to the mortuary’. When his work was completed he advised the RAAF officers present that he and his men would return to the station. Flight Lieutenant Law had come back at 12.07 p.m. and taken charge. A military guard was then posted over the crash. By the time the fire crew reached their base at 12.37 p.m., one hour and 39 minutes had elapsed since they received the call out.
The next day, as he reflected on the horrific events that were to haunt him for a long time to come, Maloney made a point of drawing attention to the fact that until his team arrived on the scene ‘no attempt was made to either fight the fire or remove the occupants of the plane’. This was almost true. Flight Sergeant Smith had deposed to the Coroner that he had ‘attempted to extinguish the flames with the extinguisher in the ambulance’, playing it on the bodies mostly. ‘It wasn’t very successful.’ Maloney, as his young colleague Kearney remembered, was ‘a real old bushman, putting it gently…practical man down to the ground. Hops in and gets things done.’ It appeared to him that ‘adequate equipment for dealing with such a situation was not available to the R.A.A.F. or, if it was available, no attempt was made to use it either before or after the arrival of the Brigade’. This was not an innocent observation. When Maloney’s superior, Percy Douglas, prepared a memorandum to accompany the typed report being forwarded to the Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Interior’s Canberra Services Branch he too remarked that it ‘would appear that prior to the arrival of the fire engine, under the command of Station Officer Maloney, no fire extinguishing agent was available’.

Douglas added that ‘Contrary to press reports all bodies were removed from the burning plane by the Canberra Fire Brigade and without the assistance of anyone.’ Douglas could not have known that Flight Sergeant Smith would tell the Service Court the next day, and the Coroner 11 days later, that he had assisted in the removal of the bodies. Sydney Rhodes would also speak to the Coroner’s Court on August 26 of helping the RAAF men ‘in removing the bodies’. The language was ambiguous. In fact, as Maloney himself said in a statement to Police Constable Leslie Ivey, ambulance officers and RAAF personnel worked with firemen ‘in placing the ten bodies in the Ambulance and RAAF Ambulance’ — Rhodes presumably gave support in transferring the bodies into the waiting vehicles. The Chief Officer did not comment on an accurate press report that his firemen had to borrow asbestos gloves from the Air Force crash tender before they could lift out the bodies.

The Fire Brigade was not overtly critical of the performance of the RAAF. Maloney had mentioned that the call to the brigade was not a direct one. It had come via the hospital. Perhaps mindful of doubts in some minds that lives might have been saved if rescuers had arrived more promptly, Douglas noted for the record that his men got the call eight minutes after the RAAF said the crash occurred. ‘Canberra’ was, he said, six miles further from the site of the crash than the aerodrome. The RAAF ‘therefore, had 8 minutes and six miles start on a

31 Coroner’s Court Inquest Papers, now at NAA: A6079, MO 625.
32 Kearney, interview, 23 July 1977.
33 The Argus, 14 Aug. 1940.
total run, from Canberra, of 16 miles’. Oddly, the Fire Brigade daily register and occurrence book contained no entry for the time of arrival at the scene; nor did the statements of Maloney and Kearney.  

At 55, an AIF Heavy Artilleryman, early president of the Canberra RSL Club, and married to a member of the pioneer Southwell family, Perce Douglas was influential in Territory social and sporting circles. He was not looking for credit for his men. Rather he was reminding the public service authorities of complaints and warnings that had been made repeatedly over the previous seven years. In August 1937, he had made recommendations about fire precautions at the aerodrome, explaining:

> such crash precautions are provided, not with the idea of using them frequently, but with the knowledge that should a crash occur the Department has at hand up to date equipment which will afford a reasonable measure of success in the attempt to rescue passengers and pilots from which, in an aeroplane crash, is unfortunately but usually, accompanied by dreaded and shocking circumstances [sic].

Subsequent complaints resulted in a flurry of blame-shifting as ‘carelessness’ was attributed by the aerodrome owners to the occupying RAAF units. As recently as January 1940 Douglas had reiterated his concern that fire-fighting equipment including a 30-gallon chemical engine, a hose reel, and 600 feet of ‘best quality hose’ were being left out in the open. ‘While the…apparatus is left out in the rain and the hot sun, deterioration, far greater than need be, must take place and the gear, small enough as it is to protect such valuable property, will shortly become useless.’ Driving the point home, Douglas concluded that it was at the time impossible to purchase new fire hose in Australia. There is no evidence that these disturbing matters had been rectified eight months later. On 13 July 1940 James Fairbairn had approved provision of £5200 for 39,000 feet of canvas fire hose to be ordered from New York. His successor as Air Minister, Arthur Fadden, authorised a further 32,000 feet on September 2.

In his signed witness statement for the Coroner, Maloney said that he assisted in placing four bodies in the ambulance, believing that the other six bodies

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34 If the firemen had arrived earlier, Jim Kearney might have seen Les McIntyre, a former Queanbeyan rugby league player who had played with a combined Southern Monaro team against Kearney’s Canberra two weekends previously (Canberra Times, 27 July 1940).
36 Report of Station Officer W. Maloney to Chief Officer, Canberra Fire Brigade, 14 Aug. 1940; Chief Officer to Assistant Secretary, Civil Administration, 9 Aug. 1937, 12 Oct. 1939, to Canberra Services Branch 11 Jan. 1940 and 14 Aug. 1940, copies and transcripts courtesy of Drew McLean, Canberra Fire and Emergency Services Museum.
37 Air Board Agenda 2917, 2985, NAA: A4181, 18.
went in the ‘RAAF tenders and ambulances’. When Stephenson and Hynes arrived at the scene, they said, they placed two bodies in their vehicle and drove directly to the morgue. The fire brigade daily-occurrence register had an entry for 1.10 p.m. on August 13 noting the return of the ambulance officers in the No 1 vehicle and their report that they had taken two bodies to the morgue. But Tommy Hynes had corrected this, deleting ‘two’ and substituting ‘three’, and adding his initials. The discrepancy does not seem to have been noticed subsequently. Stephenson, an ex-Grenadier Guardsman, had seen and gathered up fragmented bodies on the battlefield; he was perhaps more phlegmatic than his younger partner that day. Hynes had stumbled over a still-smouldering body at the crash site and he may well still have been in shock. If three had been correct, the total would have been 11, one too many. Sergeant W. H. Galvin, driving the RAAF ambulance, also took four bodies to the morgue. In language providing assurance that nothing untoward had happened on their journeys, both Stephenson and Galvin stated that they did not stop en route and had no accidents. The same assurance was offered by LAC Campbell Sheahan, who had driven a RAAF tender to the crash site and assisted in placing four bodies on the tender and taking them to the morgue.

When word came from the aerodrome that the Air Minister’s plane had crashed, Street’s secretary (Percy Hayter), Murray Tyrrell (Fairbairn’s assistant private secretary), and the Prime Minister’s secretary, Corby Tritton, were reported to have driven to Cameron’s farm to identify the victims. The speed with which the charred bodies were retrieved and transported to the hospital suggests that only the most cursory examination could have occurred at the scene, if indeed the three ministerial staff arrived there in time. On the morning of August 14, as Bill Maloney was writing his statement for the Coroner, the Canberra Times and other newspapers reported that three ministers (the Treasurer, Percy Spender, the Postmaster-General, Vic Thorby, and the Minister for Supply, Sir Frederick Stewart) had gone to the scene of the crash. According to The Mercury they ‘inspected the wreckage’. When they arrived, the Canberra Times said, they saw doctors and Air Force men removing the ‘remains’ of the victims from ‘the head of the burnt wreckage’. ‘The remains of some of the victims were unidentifiable’, the Times concluded.

Stewart and Thorby had in fact arrived on a commercial flight from Sydney late in the morning, and were joined by Spender who had left the meeting of the Loan Council at which he was presiding. Thorby, as a former Civil Aviation minister, could have had a particular interest in a catastrophe so close to the

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38 Yorkshire-born, Stephenson grew up in Cairo where his father was a pharmacist. He returned to England to study medicine but war intervened. Post-war he tried pineapple farming in Queensland before settling in Canberra in 1926 and becoming one of the town’s first firemen and ambulancemen (Obituary, Canberra Times, 24 June 1981).
airport for which he had recently shared ministerial responsibility. He had himself been the survivor of a crash landing. Stewart had been involved in some of Kingsford-Smith’s aerial business ventures. It is possible that the three ministers were driven to the scene in time to see Flight Sergeant Smith, fire chief Bill Maloney, and others standing among the wreckage at the front of the aircraft. They might have seen the well-known Canberra doctor Lew Nott, who was briefly at the scene, as well as white-coated ambulance men.39

Smith later testified, contrary to Perce Douglas’s report, that he had ‘helped to remove the bodies’. Senior Constable Brodribb of the Commonwealth Police had written on August 20 that Flying Officer Wilson had ‘assisted in the removal of the bodies from the wreckage’.40 The precise nature of the ‘assistance’ or ‘help’ may not be as significant as the fact, if it were a fact, that ministers might have arrived soon enough to talk to some of those who had been earliest and closest to the crash scene.41

Identities

At the small room that served as the morgue it fell to Dr Duncan Mackellar, medical superintendent of the Canberra hospital, to examine the bodies and determine the cause of death in each case. Mackellar, a Sydney University graduate, was a general practitioner with interests in surgery, radiology, and obstetrics. He had some pathology training but had no claim to expertise in forensic medicine. The Depression had cut short his surgical studies in Edinburgh and he had practised in Wollongong and Portland before being recruited to Canberra at the beginning of 1938. In 1940 he was a captain in the Australian Army Medical Corps Reserve, having been commissioned as an undergraduate into the Sydney University Regiment then known as the Sydney University Scouts. To his intense disappointment he had been rejected for service in the RAAF, perhaps damned by an adverse security report of his youthful flirtation with the ultra-loyalist New Guard, but more likely debarred because, at 34 in 1939, he was six years older than the age limit.42

39 Tink (Air Disaster, p.180) has the three ministers ‘talking to various RAAF types’ and being informed that until the plane had struck a log the ‘pilot had a good chance of making a crash landing in which all the occupants…might have survived’. The Aug. 14 Canberra Times report quoted has ‘flying men’ expressing this view but does not say they were speaking to, or within earshot of, ministers.
40 NAAL: A1378, P8903.
41 The Herald, 13 Aug. 1940; Canberra Times, 14 Aug. 1940.
42 Dr John Mackellar to CH, (email), 10, 18 Feb. 2009. I am grateful to Dr Mackellar who advises that the family name gained its first ‘a’ and lower case ‘k’ as a result of his emigrant grandfather’s admiration for the eminent Australian doctor and politician, Sir Charles Mackellar. For Mackellar’s later career in Mooroolbark and his pathbreaking work on direct blood transfusion, see Geoffrey Nice, Not Bricks and Mortar and Paint — but People, [?1986], and files with the Historical Society of Mooroolbark.
Confronted by the most distressing scene he had ever encountered, Mackellar’s first thought was that the bodies, some still emitting vapour, could not be identified. There was even some initial doubt about how many bodies there were. Back at Laverton, Fr Ken Morrison was instructed to prepare to take part in a ceremony at a mass grave. There were doubts about the ‘possibility of identification’. Morrison recalled working for some time on the assumption that there would be a combined graveside service until he was told there would be individual burials. As Jim Kearney later commented: ‘How the hell they ever identified anybody I wouldn’t know really.’ Murray Tyrrell, who remembered having travelled to the hospital, informed Corby Tritton in the Prime Minister’s office of the uncertainty. Menzies, said Tritton, had issued an edict: the bodies must be identified.

To assist in the grim task, the Army Minister’s private secretary, ‘Pip’ Hayter, joined Dr Mackellar. Hayter, a Great War survivor, wounded and gassed, was almost a Canberra institution. Unusually among Canberra ministerial staff, he had a working wife. The Hayters had no children and, as Pip’s assistant Garry Armstrong remembered, ‘they had a few bob more than some of their contemporaries’. After a preliminary visit around noon, Hayter returned to the morgue in the evening. His attention was directed to six of the bodies. The first was Frank Thornthwaite, for whom he had given up his place on the flight. Identifiable by military uniform on ‘a portion of the body’ and a key chain and keys in a pocket of the uniform, Thornthwaite was said to have carried a pipe, tobacco pouch, and matchbox, together with a pocket knife. Later a cigarette case with the initials ‘F. T.’ and the date ‘3/2/20’ was found.

Hayter knew both Thornthwaite and Brudenell White well. The CGS’s ‘general appearance and features’ helped to identify White; but he was definitely recognisable by the cross-sword-and-baton badge found embedded in a chest that before that morning would have had visible scars. The insignia was worn only by general officers on the shoulder strap of their coat and jacket. White’s pipe and the silver ring that he always wore on the little finger of his left hand — a gift from his beloved youngest brother Eustace, who had died after falling from a horse 42 years earlier — were not found. The gold signet ring that Street wore, well known to Hayter, allowed Mackellar to identify the Army Minister. An upper denture plate was also unique to Street. Gullett was the only member of the party known to have sets of both upper and lower dentures. Fairbairn

43 Msgnr K. R. Morrison to CH, 6 June 1983.
44 Kearney, interview, 23 July 1977.
45 In another version of these events Tyrrell recalled for Lord Casey going with Tritton to the morgue to try to identify the bodies: ‘a fairly hopeless task. There was little left to argue about’ (NAA: M1129 WHITE/C B).
46 NAA: A1378, P8903; MO 625 A6079 44 (Inquest). In an amplified statement sworn for the Coroner, Hayter substituted the less graphically confronting ‘portion of uniform’ for ‘portion of the body’.
47 Bean, Two Men I Knew, p.81.
had distinctive wartime injuries. With these identifications already made, Elford’s ‘general appearance and build’ — he was, Mackellar said, about the same stature as Fairbairn — were enough to confirm that his was the remaining body not in uniform.

Hayter could aver that he had been in daily contact with Brudenell White and Thornthwaite for the last five months, and with Street over nearly two years. There could be confidence in his identifications. He also knew Elford and Gullett well. He would tell the Coroner that he had identified the bodies ‘in company with Dr Mackellar’. He had, he said, ‘looked over the bodies’ in the morning and returned in the evening when he ‘identified’ them. In a statement to the Coroner, Hayter was explicit about seeing the dental plate being removed from Street’s mouth by Mackellar. He also said he ‘recognised’ Elford by his general appearance and build. But on all of the others the wording of Hayter’s statement indicates how he ‘identified’ them by certain physical features or personal items which were shown to him or whose presence was confirmed by the doctor. He would tell the Coroner that a part of a khaki uniform and keys in the pocket served to distinguish Thornthwaite.48 Mackellar himself testified that ‘Mr. Hayter came to the morgue and told me certain things about the deceased and together we identified the bodies.’

Mackellar’s testimony to the Coroner also left some doubt as to what Hayter actually saw. ‘Mr Hayter told me a ring would be found on Mr Street’s finger. A ring was found on Mr Street’s finger. I recognise the ring produced.’ From a statement he prepared for the Commonwealth Police it seems doubtful that Hayter looked closely at the bodies:

- I identified the body of Sir Henry Gullett because of the general appearance and build of Sir Henry Gullett and I was informed by the Medical Officer that his body had a double set of dentures.
- I identified the body of the Honourable J. V. Fairbairn because I was informed by the Medical Officer that this particular body showed injuries of long standing to each arm and, in particular, to the right arm.
- I identified the body of Mr. R. E. Elford because I was informed by the Medical Officer that this body had only one testicle and because of his general build.49

Mackellar, probably unaware of Hayter’s war record with the 23rd Infantry Battalion, had perhaps tried to spare the former regimental quartermaster sergeant sights that would distress even battle-hardened servicemen and pathologists.

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48 Courier-Mail, 27 Aug. 1940.
When Mackellar himself, still nauseous and understandably shaken by the appalling nature of what he had seen, came to write up a summary report for the Police a week after the accident he seems to have forgotten some of what he had been told. 'A larger body [than the one he had determined was Street’s] with evidence of a war wound in the left shoulder’, he said, distinguished Fairbairn from the others. More strangely, he referred to the ministerial private secretary who had assisted him in the morgue as ‘Mr Tritton’. Someone quietly amended the Commonwealth Police file copies: Fairbairn’s right shoulder (it should have been elbow) not the left; ‘Mr Hayter’ not ‘Mr Tritton’, the Prime Minister’s private secretary. The possibility that Corby Tritton was in fact present may account for Mackellar’s confusion. Certainly Tritton was well informed, recalling years later the injury, the result of a motor bike accident, that uniquely marked his friend Elford.51

When it came to determining the identities of the RAAF officers and men, Group Captain D. E. L. Wilson, who had been flown from Sydney by A. B. ‘Tich’ McFarlane, took responsibility. Flying Officer McFarlane and his crew in Hudson A16-57 had scrambled at Richmond at 1.00 p.m., picked up Wilson at Mascot, and taken off for the capital 20 minutes later, arriving at 2.30 p.m. As the senior commander nearest to Canberra, Douglas ‘Del’ Wilson, accompanied by Squadron Leader Sturt de Burgh Griffith, was assigned to liaise between government departments and the Air Board. Pilot, crew, and passengers had little time to think about the circumstances that brought them urgently together in an aircraft similar to the one that had just inexplicably crashed. McFarlane recorded in his log book: ‘Bob Hitchcock spun in in A16/97 with a stack of politicians on board.’ In retrospect, McFarlane felt that, with about 100 hours in Hudsons, he would not have considered himself suitable for the flight that Hitchcock had captained. He recalled learning that his own approach to land in Canberra, after a low circuit to get a better look at the nearby accident site, was ‘watched in fear by the locals’. McFarlane took practically the same course as A16-97 had in the morning; but, as J. V. Power told the Service Court, ‘the one in the afternoon was flying higher this was a remark made by spectators at my office’.

At the morgue, Group Captain Wilson proceeded by elimination. He was to admit to the Coroner that he knew none of the men personally. Identity discs were found but not with the bodies. However, Crosdale and Palmer’s dress

51 N. C. Tritton, interview, 7 June 1977. According to Sir Edwin Hicks (interview, 18 Sept 1980), then a Department of Air officer, it was Fairbairn who was identified by the fact that he was known to have only one testicle.
52 EFTS Mascot to Sec. Prime Minister’s Dept, telegram, 13 Aug. 1940, NAA: A461, 700/1/392.
53 McFarlane, interview, 19 April 1978; logbook 13 Aug. 1940.
indicated that they were not officers. Crosdale would have been at the rear of the aircraft in a seat by the door; he was the least burnt and mutilated. Of the two pilots, Wilson attested that he identified Wiesener as ‘the younger of the two bodies’. ‘Hitchcock was identified by reason of the fact that it was the only further body awaiting identification.’ The men at the front of the plane had borne the full impact of the crash and the flames.

Wilson’s claim to be able to distinguish between Hitchcock and Wiesener because Wiesener was younger strains credibility. ‘Wiesener is 28 and Hitchcock 38’, Wilson said. Wiesener was in fact 18 months older than Hitchcock. Maybe Wilson took height as a proxy for age. If he did, then his identifications would certainly have been wrong. At 6'1½", Wiesener was 6 ¼ inches taller than the senior man. The one surviving photograph of a somewhat cherubic Wiesener in 1940 suggests that in life he looked significantly younger than the more careworn and balding Hitchcock. In any case, as fireman Jim Kearney recalled the horrific scene, ‘there wouldn’t have been any wrinkles on those bodies, that’s for sure’. But Wilson was clearly there to make positive identifications without delay. Accuracy was a secondary consideration. When he presented his evidence to the inquest, the Coroner asked him no questions.54

Cause of death

After examining each of the bodies Dr Mackellar pronounced that it would ‘be fairly safe to assume that all ten men were killed when the plane hit the ground’. All the men, he said, had fractured skulls as ‘the immediate cause of death.’ ‘I am of the opinion that the men were killed before the plane was burnt.’ On the day of the crash, ‘Tich’ McFarlane had met the local Air Force doctor at the scene ‘wandering around with a jam tin and a fork. When I asked him what he was doing…he looked at me as if to say “You bloody fool what do you think I am doing?” He was picking up fingers, toes, and bits and pieces…a gruesome sight.’ Standing back to look at the still-smoking wreckage McFarlane remarked on how terrible it would have been to be burnt to death. The doctor corrected him: ‘These people weren’t burnt to death. They were all dead when they hit the ground — hit the ground with a great thump. They would have had broken backs, broken necks, thump like that, look at the chairs, broken, sagging. None of them would have burned to death.’ This, of course, was a conclusion at variance with Jack Butt’s belief that he had seen struggling survivors a few hours earlier, and with several newspaper reports the next day. Whatever the

54 NAA: A6079, MO 625. Tink (Air Disaster, p.11) quotes Wilson’s plainly erroneous identification of the two pilots without comment. He says that Gullett’s identity was confirmed by his gold cigarette case, actually found later, whereas his double set of dentures was conclusive.
truth about the deaths, modern forensic pathology suggests that it was more likely the subsequent inferno than the impact that caused all of the skulls to be fractured.\(^{55}\)

Acting Coroner ‘Colonel’ John Goodwin (he had been made an honorary Lieutenant Colonel on his retirement from the militia in 1920) accepted the post-mortem findings. In the state of medical knowledge at the time, it was unlikely that any further examination could have conclusively determined whether the men had died on impact. This was, in any case, the kindest conclusion that could be reached. Moreover, it was consistent with the fact that almost as soon as it hit the ground, as the first RAAF investigators on the scene noticed, the aeroplane had come to a sudden stop against a large box log. As ‘Tich’ McFarlane had deduced, the plane had fallen into the ground in an almost flat horizontal attitude and slid forward no more than 30 yards.

Sadly for the families of the victims, some newspapers had already headlined, as did the Canberra Times on August 14, ‘Ten Persons Burnt to Death.’ The Launceston Examiner the same day had referred to ‘officials who examined the wreckage after the flames died down’ saying that it was ‘the explosion’ after the crash that killed the occupants. The Argus even said that officials who examined the wreckage were certain that the aircraft ‘was very little damaged in landing, and that had the fire not occurred the occupants would have escaped’. These reports lend credence to the story of ex-AIF Lance Corporal Jack Butt and his son, axes in hand, being ordered away from the burning aircraft. It is possible that an anguished Butt himself could have spoken to journalists at the scene. Duncan Cameron’s friend might have been mistaken about what he saw. Men still alive for moments after the crash might have sustained fatal injuries. But, whatever the now unknowable truth, an official consensus soon emerged about the deaths. Making belated amends for its insensitivity two weeks earlier, the Canberra daily led its story on the Coroner’s findings on August 27 with a triple-decker headline: ‘AIR VICTIMS KILLED BY FATAL CRASH DIED BEFORE MACHINE CAUGHT FIRE CORONIAL INQUIRY INTO CANBERRA DISASTER.’\(^{56}\)

Colonel Goodwin, 74-year-old retired Commonwealth Surveyor-General and Director of Lands, and now chairman of the Federal Capital Territory Advisory Council, had begun the inquest in the tiny Canberra court ‘house’ in one of the dining rooms of the old Acton Hotel on the morning of August 14. On the previous evening he had been out to inspect the wrecked aircraft. Goodwin had

\(^{55}\) I am grateful to Professor Jo Duflou (email 28 March 2012), Chief Forensic Pathologist, Clinical Professor, University of Sydney, for advice on the effect of extreme heat on human bodies. Tink (Air Disaster, p.178) follows the Coroner, concluding that all 10 men ‘died instantly’; but at pp.191–2 he points out that a fractured skull ‘is not necessarily fatal’.

been a special magistrate in the Court of Petty Sessions in Canberra since 1930 and was experienced in coronial duties. As Charles Daley recalled, Goodwin was ‘less experienced and alert’ than his Advisory Council colleagues; but ‘he had nevertheless a tenacious side to his personality’. As a member of the Canberra Community Hospital Board he was also one of the men to whom Dr Mackellar — who ‘seemed to be afraid of the Board’ — reported. There were three RAAF officers, the chief of police (Colonel Jones), two reporters, and court attendants present in the court. Harry Jones, being there in his capacity as the Capital Territory’s police chief, could keep his other roles as director of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch and the Secret Defence Security Intelligence Bureau unadvertised. But if issues affecting security were to arise he would want to be the first to know. His meticulously presented claim for reimbursement of private car expenses records that he had been out to the scene of the crash and later to the aerodrome the previous afternoon and returned to the aerodrome the following day. Goodwin was to be assisted by J. M. Mills of the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor’s Office. As the officials who had identified the civilian bodies were said to have already departed to Melbourne and Sydney on government business, evidence was taken only about the identification of the Service personnel. In the afternoon, Group Captain Wilson was reported to have gone out to the crash site to examine the wreckage. According to the Herald he was securing evidence for an inquiry by the Air Accidents Investigation Committee ‘which may be held in Melbourne’.

When the inquest resumed on August 26, Mills questioned people who saw A16-97’s last moments in the air, presented evidence connecting specific exhibits with individuals who had perished, and led the evidence of identification for the three ministers and Dick Elford. The proceedings, carried out in accordance with the Capital Territory Coroners Ordinance 1932 and the New South Wales Coroners Act 1912, were expeditious. As the bodies had already been released for burial, and no evidence was taken as to the pilot’s health immediately before the crash, Goodwin clearly had ruled out the possibility of a medical condition contributing to the pilot’s loss of control of the aircraft. In so doing he was ignoring the working principle of the doyen of Australian coroners, Dr A. A. Palmer of Sydney, who counselled never to infer from the circumstances

in which a body was found that death was due to those circumstances.\textsuperscript{60} The idea of the pilot ‘collapsing’ was, as Hitchcock’s fellow flight commander, Jack Ryland, would later say, ‘very improbable’ but not impossible.\textsuperscript{61}

All 13 eye-witnesses were examined between 10.55 a.m. and 2.40 p.m. with a break of an hour and 25 minutes for lunch. Flight Sergeant Smith was on the stand for 23 minutes; Dudley Lalor for 15 minutes; Sydney Rhodes for 13. Since the viewings in the morgue, additional items had been found, mostly by an administrative and special-duties officer at Canberra Station HQ, Flying Officer Stanley Willmott, a 1914–18 artillery, RFC, and RAF veteran, who had seen more carnage than most men at Canberra aerodrome. ‘Pathetic personal belongings of the victims’, blackened, charred, half-melted, ‘littered’ a table in the court house.\textsuperscript{62} They confirmed the presence in the plane of White (his nine-year-old monogrammed hair brushes), Fairbairn (his engraved gold pocket watch and gold rail pass on a gold chain), Thornthwaite (a cigarette case marked ‘F. T. 3/2/20’). Another gold cigarette case was recognisably one presented to Gullett by staff of the Ministry of Information exactly two months earlier on June 14. The engraved back of Elford’s watch was enough to satisfy the Coroner that he too had died in the aircraft. Dr Mackellar was shown and verified the items that he had seen in the morgue.

Had Mackellar or Colonel Goodwin paused to reflect on the assembled 47 exhibits they might have been struck by the poignant assembly of five pocket timepieces and four wrist watches — silenced reminders of the social gulf that separated in life the 10 men united in death. Percy Hayter restated how he was able to identify the six civilian victims. Having determined the identity of the men and the cause of their deaths, the Coroner’s task was complete. Mills had advised Goodwin that coronial jurisdiction started at the time of death. What caused the plane to fall was a matter for another tribunal. These were dubious contentions. However, Mills evidently felt free to say that ‘there were no suspicious circumstances’. The Coroner was more cautious. ‘There is no evidence’, he concluded, ‘to determine the cause of the accident.’\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{60} J. B. Cleland, ‘Inquests and Experiences in the Coroner’s Court’, \textit{Medical Journal of Australia}, vol. II No. 18, 9 Nov. 1940, p.435. In the UK and US, post-mortem examinations or autopsies after transport accidents were not routine until the late 1950s (Peter J. Stevens, \textit{Fatal Civil Aircraft Accidents: Their Medical and Pathological Investigation}, John Wright & Sons, Bristol, 1970, pp.2–3; Col. Claude K. Leeper, ‘The Development of Aviation Pathology and the Joint Committee on Aviation Pathology’, in William J. Reals \textit{et. al.}, eds, \textit{Medical Investigation of Aviation Accidents}, College of American Pathologists, Chicago, 1968, p.72).
\bibitem{61} Air Force Court of Inquiry, transcript of evidence, 27 Aug. 1940, p.24 (NAA: A705, 32/10/2729).
\bibitem{62} \textit{Northern Standard} (Darwin), 27 Aug. 1940.
\bibitem{63} ‘Inquisition before a Coroner Sitting Alone’, 26 Aug. 1940, Canberra Coroner’s Court Papers, and in NAA: A6079, MO 625; \textit{Canberra Times}, 27 Aug. 1940. Tink (\textit{Air Disaster}, p.191) says: ‘it appears that in accepting Mills’ argument about the commencement of his jurisdiction…Goodwin ignored all the evidence he had heard which suggested that some of the victims might have survived the initial impact.’ In fact, whatever he might have read in the newspapers, no evidence of this kind was put to the Coroner.
\end{thebibliography}
None of those affected by the crash were to forget where they were when they first heard about it. Or rather, as is the way with human memory, recollections evolved. Roland Wilson, then Commonwealth Statistician and Economic Adviser to the Treasurer, remembered 44 years later that he was at a Premiers’ Conference in Canberra at 11.00 a.m. when someone came in and spoke quietly to the Prime Minister who quickly made the news known to all of those present. Wilson was right to remember being present at a meeting with the state premiers that day. The Loan Council had been in session for several days. But it was not the Prime Minister at his side but the Treasurer, Percy Spender, who was president of the Council.

Was there a fear that secret papers or security keys might have fallen into inappropriate hands? As late as January 1941, enquiries were being made about two keys issued to Jim Fairbairn facilitating after-hours access to Victoria Barracks. A similar set held by Street had been returned, as had the keys to his Melbourne and Canberra safes. Officers of the Prime Minister’s department were said to be searching through the wreckage for ‘valuable documents’. No one could say what had been taken on board. Newspapers reported that files and secret documents had been destroyed in the flames. Officials were quick to call on the widows of ministers, Thornthwaite, and Elford to retrieve papers that had been in their husbands’ possession. But there seems to have been no urgency about returning a bundle of partly burnt papers recovered from the scene. The Commonwealth Police passed the six typewritten sheets in an envelope to the Defence Secretariat in Canberra on October 10, whence they were forwarded to Army headquarters. Evidently the papers had remained in police safekeeping along with personal items like house keys, badges, cigarette cases, hair brushes, scissors, coins, and watches, most of which had been found at the scene by Flying Officer Willmott. All these were returned to the relevant next of kin or executors at the same time. It was not until November 19 that a letter from Olive Hitchcock to the Prime Minister drew attention to Mrs Palmer’s wish to know of any of her husband’s belongings, specifically the rosary beads he had been wearing. The beads and an attached St Christopher medal had indeed been found. MPs’ gold passes were sent back to the Department of the Interior.

While the coronial inquest was adjourned after its first sitting, official protocols of condolence and funeral preparation were being set in motion and messages about the memorial service were being despatched to the bereaved families.

64 Sir Roland Wilson, interview, 28 March 1984. Wilson had inherited what remained of the aeroplane’s duraluminum propeller from his friend the Commissioner for Patents, who had retrieved it from the Deakin tip and had been cutting off pieces and melting them down in his workshop.
65 Canberra Times, 14 Aug. 1940, p.5.
66 NAA: A1378, 4/168,181,190,197. Other items were found by Cpl Victor Walpole, F/O Wilson, and Flt Sgt Smith (NAA: A6079, MO 625).
67 NAA: A461, 700/1/392.
In Canberra and Melbourne there was urgent confabulation about what must happen next. For the Air Force there was some satisfaction that the Coroner had been plainly intent on a rapid and tidy inquest. Not for him or for them the embarrassment of the inquest at Windsor in January into the crash of an Avro Anson into the Richmond Golf Links resulting in the deaths of Flight Lieutenant Arthur Moorehouse Watkins, Flight Lieutenant Hugh Horner, two accompanying flying officers, and a leading aircraftsman. The Windsor court house had been the scene of an inquisition of RAAF witnesses by relatives of the deceased. ‘King’ Cole’s No. 2 Group HQ had been instructed by the Air Board that, although it was not considered necessary to have counsel to represent the Service, there should be a ‘responsible senior officer in touch with facts of the case to watch Service interests and ensure that Coroner exercises powers under National Security Regulations and otherwise to prevent publication in the Press of any matters…which are considered contrary to public policy to have published’. But, to the horror of Cole’s superiors, the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* had carried a full report of the proceedings; and the national press seized on the story of laxity in engine checks, deficiencies in record keeping, alleged shortage of mechanics, and over-working of personnel.68

There was little comfort for the RAAF in being told that the legal officer sent to Windsor to watch the Service’s interests reported that every technical allegation made against the Air Force was refuted, that all the Sydney newspaper reports were misleading, and the *Daily Telegraph* ‘appeared to be deliberately so’. Following the inquest, a confidential investigation at No. 1 Group by Group Captain Henry Wrigley had substantiated that there was ‘serious laxity in the application of the maintenance system’, the captains of the aircraft and the officer in charge of the flight having neglected the supervision for which they were responsible. The father of the dead pilot, knowing nothing of the adverse findings on his son, pressed his local MP, Sir Frederick Stewart (Minister for Supply and Development), for answers to unanswered questions. But it was not until May 1940 that a bulky file containing the Court of Inquiry proceedings and an explanation of what looked like a dismissive draft reply to the bereaved father — ‘answers to several of the points reflect adversely on his late son, therefore the less said the better’ — had found its way to an impatient Minister for Air’s desk. Jim Fairbairn’s evasiveness about allegations of lax maintenance had meanwhile brought him a rebuke from one of the fathers. ‘Mr Fairbairn

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68 Parents had themselves testified to the Coroner to rebut allegations that their pilot sons had been drinking the night before the crash. Hearsay evidence was led that the captain of the aircraft had complained that maintenance of his machine was being compromised because the number of mechanics in the squadron had been reduced from 15 to six. To the relief of harried RAAF officers, after a day of angry outbursts and conflicting testimony the Coroner had thought better of prolonging his inquiry into what ‘does appear to be some laxity in the manner in which the planes were serviced before flight’ (*Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, 26 Jan. 1940).
would be doing an injustice to the cause of aviation generally and particularly
to the interests of the hundreds of young men now training if he showed a
reluctance to examine carefully all evidence relating to fatalities in the RAAF.’

It was symptomatic of the confusion and apprehension in Service headquarters
over this episode that the Court of Inquiry file had been mislaid for two months,
wrongly attached to a related file on coronial inquiries. Confusion was further
compounded by the preparation of a letter for the Air Minister’s signature
referring to the Service Court of Inquiry as an ‘Air Court of Inquiry’.69 These
muddles could no doubt be eliminated. When the victims were not household
names the press would in due course lose interest. But a judicial probe into
the accident to A16-97 would be a major national news story no matter how
carefully it was shaped and monitored.

69 Sydney Morning Herald, 20, 22 Jan. 1940. A Court of Inquiry held in the last two weeks of December
had blamed this otherwise inexplicable accident during a celestial navigation exercise on the Venturi-driven
instruments not settling down before the aircraft entered cloud, thus giving the pilot a false horizon (‘Flying
Accident to Anson Aircraft N 4887…’, NAA: A705, 32/10/2386).