19. Obsequies

Understanding the crash was an imperative for the Air Force. The government also had to be seen to be committed to doing all that could be done to advance the quest for explanations. What had happened in Canberra was shocking and bewildering. The tragedy of 13 August 1940 was national. But first it was personal, intimate. For families and friends whose loved ones had been lost in horrific circumstances the grief was natural and intense. No one could predict exactly when and how it would find expression, how long it would last. It was properly private. Yet there was an indistinct boundary between what could and should be kept from the public gaze and the national recognition and mourning that enveloped the personal loss. Burial or cremation were family decisions. But in a disaster of this magnitude somehow they had to be harmonised with the ceremonial events that were prescribed by custom or created for the occasion. For the public, an opportunity to pay tribute, and to perform rituals of eulogy, thanksgiving, and memorial, required planning and organisation. It was all done in a day.

On the morning of August 14, The Argus leader writer, who had lost a former colleague in the crash, wrote of the ‘fearful swath cut by Death’:

…a reverent sense of fitness and spontaneous feeling alike demand that the community shall pause in its daily round to express sympathy with the bereaved relatives, with the Federal Ministry, with the Royal Australian Air Force, and with the Australian Army in the loss of their loved ones, their loyal colleagues, and their efficient servants.

In Service protocol, distinctions of rank, status, and religion were finely drawn, in death as in life. For the three Cabinet ministers, the Army and Air Force officers, and Dick Elford there was to be a combined memorial service in St Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne at 11.45 a.m. on August 15. Services would be held simultaneously at St Andrew’s Cathedral in Sydney and St John’s Church in Canberra. The Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne would give the address at St Paul’s. Dick Wiesener, a member of the Homebush-Strathfield Congregational Church, was to be embraced among the Church of England group. So too were Dick Elford whose parents were Christian Scientists and Bob Hitchcock, a member of the Church of Christ.1 All of the bodies were to be brought overnight by special train, leaving from Canberra at 7.30 p.m., to Princes Bridge station opposite the cathedral.2 Passing through Seymour, the train would slow down

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1 ‘Feeling references were made to the death of Bro. R. Hitchcock’ at the following Sunday service at the Hampton church where he had once worshipped (Australian Christian, 21 Aug. 1940).
2 The Age wrongly reported on Aug. 15 that the bodies had been flown to Melbourne. Other papers thought that only nine bodies were going to Melbourne.
for a guard of honour from Puckapunyal to pay tribute. Troops along the length of the Princes Bridge platform would present arms, with officers coming to the salute. Eight of the caskets were then to be carried across Flinders Street by bearer parties flanked by a guard of honour. Three officers and 50 other ranks of 12 Garrison Battalion and five RAAF officers and 100 other ranks would make up the guard. A full muffled peal of bells, a tribute reserved for the nation's greatest citizens, would be rung at 11.00 a.m.

For the Roman Catholic airmen, Jack Palmer and Charlie Crosdale, there were other arrangements to be made. There had been some anxieties, especially among Sheila Palmer's brothers and the rest of the Curtain clan, that their Catholic faith would not be acknowledged in a memorial service in an Anglican cathedral. They would not have forgotten the controversy that had continued since 1938 when the Victorian branch of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA), in a gesture of inclusiveness to Catholics and Jews in particular, had introduced a non-denominational ANZAC Day service of songs and silent prayer at the Shrine of Remembrance. Archbishop Head as well as the senior Presbyterian and Methodist chaplains had protested and declined to attend the 'civic' ceremony. Generals Brudenell White and Smyth, following the lead of the most senior Australian General, Chauvel, unhappy at the abandonment of the traditional Anglican service, had refused to lead the march to the Shrine in 1938; and, like the church leaders, they were again absent in April 1939 and 1940. Congregational and Baptist spokesmen regretted the RSSILA's decision but left attendance to the conscience of individual ministers.3

Catholic fears were allayed when it was announced that a special requiem mass had been arranged by Archbishop Mannix at St Patrick's Cathedral for the day after the state funeral, 'as an expression of the general sympathy of the Catholic community'. It was agreed that the caskets of Corporal Palmer and Aircraftman Crosdale would be taken directly from the train by an Air Force party to St Patrick's, thence to Sleight's Funeral Parlors in St Kilda Road. An Air Force tender would take Palmer's casket to St Patrick's where it was placed on a catafalque in front of the high altar. There, in the presence of Sheila Palmer, her parentsin-law, siblings and other relatives, prayers were read by Father Ken Morrison,

3 With Catholic students expected to listen to the broadcast service, the state Education Department had suggested the replacement of the ‘Protestant’ hymns ‘O God Our Help’ and ‘Abide With Me’ with ‘Australia, Land of Ours’ and ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ (Mark Lyons, Legacy: The first fifty years, Legacy Co-ordinating Council & Lothian Publishing, Melbourne, 1978, p.68). Peter S. Sadler, The Paladin: A Life of Major-General Sir John Gellibrand, Oxford UP, Melbourne, 2000, pp.241–2; The Argus, 24 Feb., 23, 25 April 1940. Smyth's absence in 1938 was attributed to ill-health. The 1937 march had been marred by a wrangle over the selection of Major-General Senator Brand over the heads of three more senior generals after White, Smyth, and Gellibrand had all declined (Cairns Post, 19 April 1937). Chauvel said that ‘the Jews wanted to cut everything Christian out of the service’ (Lord Wakehurst diary, 24 April 1938, Wakehurst Papers, ML MSS 6347 1 5). ‘The service as drawn up meets with the unqualified approval of Rabbi Danglow only!’ (F. E. Dixon to the editor, The Herald, 12 April 1938, copy, Menzies MSS, NLA 4936, 579/2).
the padre at Laverton. The funeral mass, deferred to the next day because of the Feast of the Assumption, was celebrated by Father Morrison, and attended by Palmer’s parents, sister, and brothers Max and Laurie, as well as five brothers-in-law, the Tasmanian Deputy Premier, the influential Victorian ALP executive member and Curtain family friend, Councillor Arthur Calwell, and unnamed RAAF officers and airmen. An RAAF guard of honour, 20 NCOs and men and five officers, lined the path from the gateway to the cathedral entrance. Father Morrison also conducted the funeral service at the old Melbourne General Cemetery.

Following telephone consultation with Rita Crosdale and her husband’s parents, it was decided that Charlie Crosdale’s remains would be returned directly to the Hunter Valley. The news that Crosdale’s body would be taken home via Newcastle was conveyed to his widow’s parents by railway officers who intercepted them en route to Melbourne to be with their daughter and new grandchild. Ben and Mary Ling had responded to an eight-word telegram from their daughter the day before: ‘Charles killed. Baby son born. Come at once.’ Keith Murdoch’s Melbourne Sun News Pictorial had published the message. Even the details of the changed travel arrangements were reported in the press — no aircraftman had ever been paid such attention in death or in life. Crosdale’s casket was taken by car from West Maitland railway station to his parents’ home in Paxton, 27 miles further; after a requiem mass at St Joseph’s Catholic Hall in Cessnock, he was buried in Ellalong cemetery. Contingents from the RAAF seaplane base at Rathmines and the AIF at Gretna were present along with the RAAF band. Rowley James MHR and the NSW Premier’s private secretary had accompanied the casket most of the way, James detouring nine miles to his own home town, Kurri Kurri. Federal ministers, who had hurried to Melbourne the day before, were represented by the Cessnock Postmaster. Business houses in Cessnock closed for five minutes at four o’clock on August 16 to coincide with the funeral ceremony. The rest of the community showed their respects at a Sunday night memorial service at St John’s Church of England. The next morning the Prime Minister gave instructions that the Commonwealth was to meet the costs of travel from Melbourne to Cessnock of Crosdale’s widow, her parents, and her infant son.

The Adjutant-General, Major General Victor Stantke, appointed only two weeks earlier, was responsible for arranging the state funeral. He had previously managed the funeral procession for Joe Lyons in Sydney and the transfer of the late Prime Minister’s coffin to a naval destroyer for return to Tasmania. Stantke had received preliminary advice by telegram from Duntroon just after 4.30 p.m. on the day of the crash from the Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Department that there might be a service in King’s Hall at Parliament House on Wednesday and at St Paul’s Cathedral in Melbourne the next day. Colonel
R. C. Prisk, Director of Personal Services, was sent immediately to Canberra to liaise with officials there. Stantke and his staff were bombarded with queries, requests, and suggestions, not least from RAAF headquarters. Duties were to be shared and co-ordinated. The military worked with E. C. Rigby, the lay canon of St Paul’s, on requirements at the cathedral. By the next day Lieutenant Colonel R. E. Pascoe, Assistant Chief Marshal, signed and distributed 180 copies of a five-page summary of the arrangements for special trains, guards of honour, bearer parties, troops to line the streets, vehicles for the conveyance of caskets, formation of the corteges, floral cars, mourners’ cars, routes to be taken, an artillery salute, and a motor ambulance to be held on call at Victoria Barracks. Dress was prescribed: ‘All ranks — No. 4 Service Dress Drill Order.’ Officers would wear Service Dress (cloth), cap, jacket, breeches, field boots or leggings, Sam Browne belts without shoulder strap, mourning band, gloves, ribands but not medals. ‘Armlets and spurs will not be worn. Swords and canes will not be carried.’

Geoff Street and Frank Thornthwaite, intimate friends for 25 years, neighbours at Derrinallum, were to make their last journey together. After the half-hour service was over they were to be brought out first and carried back across Flinders Street to Princes Bridge station then placed on a train for Lismore, 106 miles to the west. A large official party, led by the Prime Minister and including Cabinet colleagues, senior public servants, and Army officers, would accompany the coffins on the special train. After a procession to the Presbyterian church a mile from the Lismore railway station, a funeral service would be led by the Rev. E. A. Forbes. Hundreds of returned servicemen formed a guard of honour at the cemetery. Former comrades filed past the graves casting poppies over the coffins.

Normally, The Argus had reported, a general’s coffin would be carried on a gun carriage with a cortege of four battalions of infantry, and a cavalry escort led by the general’s charger. On this occasion the arrangements were to be much simpler. Brudenell White would, in due course, follow Street and Thornthwaite in the leading motor hearse en route to Buangor accompanied by a police escort. As White’s casket was placed on its conveyance outside the cathedral, a flag signal from high on a parapet would be given to begin an artillery salute, 17 minute guns fired by a saluting battery in the nearby Domain. Then would come Gullett, Fairbairn, Hitchcock, Wiesener, and Elford, each in turn, followed

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4 ‘Funeral Arrangements — Air Accident Canberra, involving Ministers, Military Officers and others on 13 Aug 1940’, NAA: MP508/1, 76/701/78.
5 Camperdown Chronicle, 17 Aug. 1940.
by a floral coach and chief mourners’ car. The whole procession would turn south along St Kilda Road, travelling between some 1800 men from Navy, Army, and Air Force units standing in single rank on both sides from Batman Avenue.

As each cortege reached a designated turn-off point it would form up with its own funeral party. Wiesener’s casket, which would be returning to Sydney by train, would be taken in the interim to Sleight’s Funeral Parlors. The others would pause at Victoria Barracks; and then would be driven under RAAF direction to Springvale Cemetery — Elford, Gullett, and Fairbairn for cremation (a costly option as fuel prices had risen), Hitchcock for burial. At the Spring Vale Necropolis, a Masonic service was conducted for Hitchcock by the secretary of the Verdon Lodge. Among the pallbearers were two young Flying Officers, B. M. Palmer and Stanley Prowd, who had been under Hitchcock’s tutelage, Bob Dalkin, and their squadron commander Fred Thomas.

The Prime Minister, better acquainted with Presbyterian than Anglican forms, had asked Archbishop Head to ‘personally’ conduct the service. In the event, the Precentor, the Rev. H. O. Hole, read the burial service; Bishop Charles Riley from Bendigo, chaplain of the 10th Light Horse 1918–19, read the lesson; and the Archbishop gave the address. The anthem was the consoling chorus ‘How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place’ from Brahms’ German Requiem. (The order of service acknowledged the composer but omitted the title with its reminder of the enemy nation.) The ‘Dead March’ from Handel’s Saul provided the traditional ending. National radio stations broadcast the service and reported on the processions to and from the cathedral. There were few serious hitches.

Invitational telegrams from the Prime Minister went out on the afternoon of August 14 noting that the service would be at 11.45 a.m. the next day, not 2.00 p.m. as had been announced in the press. Sir George Fairbairn missed the service for his nephew because the telegram arrived after he had already left to visit his property. The Wiesener family name was misspelled in the order of service. Lieutenant General Miles of Eastern Command, Major General Sturdee of the 8th Division, and Major General Richardson of the 1st Cavalry Division (Brudenell White’s associate in the secretive patriotic defence of the realm a decade before), all of whom had travelled from Sydney, were left off the Army list of attendees provided to the press. The next day, the Deputy Adjutant-General wrote to newspaper chiefs of staff asking that the generals’ travel from Sydney to attend be mentioned.

Meanwhile, a panicky morning telegram from Frank Strahan, Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Department, exposed fears that important personages arriving

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7 Cremation cost approximately £7.7.0, double the cost of burial. RSSAILA diaries advised that members were eligible for a reduction to £4.4.0 (Sir Thomas White, diary 1940, T. W. White MSS, NLA MS9148, Box 1; Jessie Hennessy, Springvale Botanical Cemetery to CH, [email], 19 Jan. 2010).

8 F/O Stanley Prowd was killed in a test flight accident in August 1941.
by plane at Essendon might not get tickets assuring their passage through the barriers around the cathedral. ‘Not received until too late’, noted Stantke, a man of few words, most of them blunt and direct. He did not have to deal with the complaint to the Prime Minister from the Netherlands Consul-General that, after negotiating their way through barricades and chain fences, he and his Chinese colleague were forced to sit in one of the last rows of chairs rather than on the consular bench. After the cathedral service and processions were over, Stantke joined the party that accompanied White to Buangor for what was meant to be a very private burial. ‘Presumed a great deal’, General Lavarack’s ADC recorded. Lavarack, never inhibited in expressing his opinions, had a simple explanation for Stantke’s presumption: ‘He’s a Bosch.’

Unaware of this annoyance to a former Chief of the General Staff, the Prime Minister had written before the day was out to the new Minister for the Army commending Stantke’s customary ‘great courtesy and efficiency’. Menzies went on to add that the ‘parades of Troops at the various places between Canberra and Melbourne, and in Melbourne, and the military bearing of those taking part therein, were the subject of gratifying comment’. Members of units of the Citizen Military Forces who were detailed for duty had cost the Army £145.1.3 in pay and fares. As far as the Chief Finance Officer (Military) was concerned, the expenditure was incurred in connection with the funerals of Lieutenant General Sir Brudenell White and Lieutenant Colonel Frank Thornthwaite. The others, it seems, were incidental beneficiaries. When the other costs of the funerals and memorial services, including a service in St Paul’s Cathedral in London attended by 22 relatives as well as dignitaries, were calculated, the Treasury’s final tally was £1434.17.2.

As invoices were collated and bills paid, missing flags tracked down, and thank-you letters despatched, there were a few remaining glitches and aggravations to be dealt with. The Department of Supply and Development fielded complaints from the Queanbeyan undertaker, M. H. O’Rourke, and Melbourne’s B. Matthews Pty Ltd that their contracts to arrange funerals for Defence personnel had not been honoured. The Prime Minister’s Department, acting in ignorance of these arrangements, had authorised the Department of the Army to engage A. A. Sleight in Melbourne and Masons of Queanbeyan. The quick-thinking head of the Prime Minister’s Department maintained that, as the Commonwealth had decided on a state funeral for all of the men, the contracts did not apply. Unappeased, the contractors niggled for months over whether the inclusion of

10 NAA: MP508/1, 76/701/80.
RAAF personnel in the state funeral was a breach of the exhaustively detailed contract which in Matthews’ case had been signed to run for four years from 1 July 1940.\(^\text{11}\)

‘The ceremonies were carried out satisfactorily despite much tension in the upper echelons’, recalled the then Group Captain Joe Hewitt who, as RAAF Director of Personal Services, was closely involved. Hewitt, possibly the ablest of his generation in the Air Force,\(^\text{12}\) had himself presided late in 1938 over a politically sensitive Committee of Inquiry after the crash of an Anson and the loss of five lives. Tasked now by the Chief of the Air Staff to keep him informed on how the funeral arrangements were progressing, he was careful not to mention anything that would reflect badly on his colleagues. With attention focused on the procession of vehicles leaving the cathedral, no-one had noticed that 22 of the 30 cars that had conveyed passengers from Spencer Street were retained for hours after they were needed. Sir Charles Burnett was not told of the disarray at Laverton when it was realised that many of the airmen directed to attend the funerals were still awaiting the issue of complete uniforms.\(^\text{13}\) Dick Elford’s friend from Geelong Grammar, the porter Tom Judd, was among those rushed through the store to make up the deficiencies but he still had to borrow someone else’s trousers. The men from Laverton had been divided into Catholic and Protestant groups, but the Catholic contingent was so small it had to be reinforced with unsuspecting Protestants.\(^\text{14}\) The Anglican Judd found himself attending mass at St Patrick’s rather than paying his respects to the Geelong Grammarians, Elford and Fairbairn.\(^\text{15}\)

Air Vice-Marshal Hewitt was to write years later:

The disaster seemed to make each and every one of us experience a sense of blame. Just why should such a thing happen!

Burnett obviously felt the loss of Fairbairn and perhaps, too, a sense of failure since a major reason for his being CAS was to cut down the aircraft accident rate in the RAAF. He was really hot on this problem

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\(^{11}\) Army papers relating to funeral arrangements and condolence messages from service units were gathered in NAA: MP 508, 76/701/78. The Prime Minister’s Department file including the Service funeral contract conditions for Tasmania, South Australia, and Victoria is at NAA: A461, 700/1/392.

\(^{12}\) He was so regarded by ACM Sir Frederick Scherger (interview, 2 Sept. 1978).

\(^{13}\) Before the war, uniforms had been manufactured by the Commonwealth Government Clothing Factory; but it had been unable to keep up with demand and civilian contractors had not yet made up the shortage (NAA: A705, 39/8/188).

\(^{14}\) ‘I had 230 Catholics between Laverton & Point Cook in 1939 out of a total of 1300...We were very heavily represented in clerical & medical musterings etc. but lacking in trade musterings’ (Msgnr K. Morrison to CH, 6 June 1983).

\(^ {15}\) Judd, *Fifty Years*, pp.112–3.
and despite the growth rate of the RAAF under war conditions he had certainly been successful in the circumstances — never failing to see that appropriate disciplinary action was taken.

Burnett, as we have seen, owed his appointment in Australia to an almost accidental meeting with Fairbairn when it seemed that his career was almost over. He had enjoyed notably amicable relations with his minister. Whatever hint may have reached Burnett that Fairbairn might have been in part at least the author of his own fatal misfortune, Joe Hewitt ‘sensed in him after this terrible accident an irritability on his part for Australians and things Australian’. The senior commanders on whom Burnett relied had let him down.16

WCdr Joe Hewitt, S/Ldr Fred Thomas, GpCpt Ray Brownell, and unidentified S/Ldr at Laverton, October 1940

(Courtesy of Rob Thomas)

Their lives having been celebrated, their bodies at rest, private mourning for the victims would continue long after the short season of public homage ended. Three days after the state funeral, The Argus and the Canberra Times reported, many people were visiting the crematorium in the hope of seeing the urns of Gullett, Fairbairn, and Elford. As the ashes were kept in steel containers in a room to which only family members were permitted access, the pilgrimages were

in vain. As the tide of grief receded, the routines of government and Service life resumed. The Prime Minister would replace his lost Cabinet colleagues and install a new Army chief under the formal authority of the Governor-General.

For the RAAF personnel, being ‘struck off the strength’ required a series of 17 signatures. Designated authorities had to certify the absence of liabilities to the barracks, mess, canteen, recreation club, technical library, medical and dental, base library, tool store, pay clerk, benevolent fund, stores officer, O.C Flight, Squadron Commander, and education officer. The accounting officer and the adjutant signed off ‘final clearing action’, completing the ‘clearance certificate’, form E/A. 32. Then, just in case any of the officers or men from No. 2 Squadron had died owing money to their fellows, station ‘routine orders’ on the day of the funeral invited anyone with a claim to submit it in writing to the president of the Committee of Adjustment by noon on August 18. The Committee of Adjustment was also responsible for making inventories of each man’s ‘personal and private’ effects and Service clothing, assembling death certificates and information about the beneficiaries of any wills, and gathering statutory declarations to authenticate the validity of spouse claims. For men who had been issued with equipment, ‘deficiencies’ in toolkits had to be listed. However defective its flying training or pilot selection might be, the Service’s adherence to its administrative procedures and paperwork was unimpeachable. A cohort of ex-RFC, RAF, and RAAF officers had been recruited and given a course of training to relieve officers in full flying practice from such administrative chores and other ground duties; and a whole new ‘Administrative and Special Duties Branch’ had been created in the CAF to embrace essential non-flying tasks.17

In the face of tragedy there was something about the assignments and responsibilities laid down in Service manuals and routine orders that assuaged the pain. Fatalities were always and inevitably distressing. Yet they had become commonplace enough in the RAAF for there to be protocols in place to cover the contingent consequences. Wrecked machines would be written off and replaced. Within a few days, new pilots would arrive to take the place of those who were lost. Personal effects would be dispersed to next-of-kin. Shared memories would begin to fade as fresh challenges and adventures obtruded. Pilot Officer Keith Eddison, who ‘used to have a good bit of fun’ with Hitchcock, probably reflected the sentiments of many young men in No. 2 Squadron, when he wrote to his mother:

I managed to escape the funeral even though I was tempted with seat tickets at St Paul’s. I’ve been O.C. wreaths & general chuck out about

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the place. You’ve absolutely no idea the upheaval it caused here for a day or two but thank heaven it’s all over now & forgotten. By the way I lent my cap to put on the bod [sic] so you may see it in the pictures.18

Insouciant as some might affect to be, puzzles about a crash that had killed friends and work mates would linger, debated inconclusively. But in this unique case the ill-informed and desultory speculation of the officers’ mess would soon be overshadowed by intimations that in the upper echelons of the Service and the government there were deep concerns. There was surely more to be said about the causes of a most calamitous event. ‘A pretty poor show that,’ as Eddison wrote on August 16, ‘& nobody knows just what happened yet.’ When comrades in uniform died in company with some of the nation’s most famous men, serious questions had to be asked and answered by those in authority.

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