In seeking a path through the conflict of testimony and hypothesis about responsibility for the crash, the formal records of Bob Hitchcock’s Service progress are an essential resource. We have seen that he was a slow learner during his initial training. But what seem to be the most relevant official files do not tell the whole story. Whether by accident or deliberate omission, Hitchcock’s personal dossier does not contain the evidence that has led some scholars to conclude that a finding of pilot error in August 1940 was most likely to have been correct. The truth was that the records on Hitchcock’s personal file omitted the decisive moment when the Service had considered terminating his flying career. The flying log book made available to Justice Lowe had no entries before the beginning of 1938. His friend Rex Taylor was to tell others years later that Hitchcock was ‘a frightful pilot and he could not even pass his “ab initio” flying test’.¹ This was an exaggeration. So too was George Jones’s explanation in hindsight:

Hitchcock was the son of Hitchcock who was lost out in the desert searching for Kingsford Smith. When he got old enough he applied to join the Air Force, but he wasn’t very bright, and he would not have been accepted had the selection committee not given a great deal of weight to political influence to get him in. But all throughout his training he was a doubtful case as to whether he should go on or not…he just made the grade and that’s all.²

Was the Hitchcock of August 1940 the same uncertain pilot of 1935 and 1936? That was the assumption of Dickie Cohen (later Sir Richard Kingsland), who had not seen his fellow cadet for four years before his death. It was the experience that the then tyro Herb Plenty said he remembered seven decades later. However, it was not what David Campbell heard when he arrived at No. 2 Squadron to take Dick Wiesener’s place. Hitchcock, he understood, was ‘a very respected pilot’. Deryck Kingwell’s testimony was similar: ‘The entire service was shocked by this accident because Bob was not only considered to be a very able pilot but one who was always expected to be “cool” under all circumstances.’ Kingwell, who had flown with Hitchcock in a Hudson in late July 1940, was then already recognised as one of the best young pilots in the Service. He was on track to become an outstanding operational battle commander. Thirty-eight years later, a distinguished retired Group Captain, he described his former Laverton mess mate as having ‘a very conscientious service outlook’. Hitchcock ‘could always be relied upon to give of his best at all times. Because of this attribute he was an excellent pilot and obviously especially chosen for the particular mission.’³

¹ Rev. Bill Gilmour to CH, 9 May 1983, reporting a conversation with Taylor two weeks earlier.
³ David Campbell, telephone interview, 26 May 1978; ACdre D. W. Kingwell to CH, 18 April, 31 May 1978.
Kingwell spoke of what he remembered and what he had known. He was not on oath but had no obvious reason to colour the truth. He had not been a witness in the 1940 inquiries. At that time he had not been converted to Hudsons. He was not responsible for training Hitchcock, nor did he command him. Others
who were qualified to offer testimony to successive inquiries were not asked to
do so. Some, like Paddy Heffernan, were too far away. Heffernan had arrived
in Sembawang near Singapore on August 9. No. 1 Squadron was already there.
And the ground personnel of No. 8 Squadron and No. 21 Squadron had left
Melbourne in the liner *Strathallan* on the day of the crash.

Heffernan's absence was unfortunate. He was one of the RAAF's most experienced
and versatile flyers, having undergone a test pilot's course in England and flown
10 different types in a month. He had converted to Hudsons under Alec Barlow,
who had taught him that the aircraft could 'bite'. His written appreciation of
Hitchcock's ability in 1939 had been considered generous by Harry Wrigley,
but he was uniquely qualified to advise on the credibility of the speculations
about Hitchcock and Fairbairn. He had been closely associated with both of
them.

In correspondence 38 years later, Heffernan reviewed what he knew about the
two men. Hitchcock he said was 'a rather stolid type'. His first thought was that
the Hudson's 'flicking characteristic', which he believed to be the most likely
cause of the accident, might have caught Hitchcock unawares. But there was
more to it than that. His experience with Fairbairn in 1939 was directly relevant:

I knew Fairbairn well and flew with him when I was instructing him on
the N.A.16, which was a smaller version of the Wirraway and we used
it as a general hack machine for the purpose of keeping in practice on
single engine planes. Fairbairn was a good average pilot, but because of
the handicap of his useless left arm, I would not let him go solo on the
N.A.16 for the following reason, the flaps were wound up and down
manually and the control was on the left hand side, the same side as the
throttle. On coming into land, the hand was removed from the throttle
and placed on the flap control and the flaps then wound down. In the
event of a bad landing, the engine was given full power and then the
flaps were wound up. In Fairbairn's case, he had to let go the control
column with his right hand and then transfer it to the throttle and then
to the flaps and in the meantime to hold the control column between
his knees. In an emergency, events happened far too quickly for him to
do all this with safety, so I refused to send him solo. His private aircraft
which he flew solo, did not have flaps, consequently there was no need
for his right hand to be flashing round the cockpit.  

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4 RAAF records indicate that Heffernan was in Singapore. For the departures of No. 8 and No. 21 Squadrons
Fire Brigade daily-occurrence register for Aug. 13 notes 'further information may be obtained from Wing
Commander Heffernan of R.A.A.F.'
5 Vincent, *The RAAF Hudson Story*, Book One, p.296.
6 ACdre P.G. Heffernan to CH, 7, 21 April 1978.
It is noticeable that Heffernan said it was the left hand, minus two fingers, that was useless. He might have added that it was Fairbairn's right arm, 'permanently bent by an explosive bullet', that had limited mobility. As readers of the Warrnambool Standard had learned from an article their local state Legislative Assembly member wrote about a visit to Mussolini's Rome in 1933, he had been embarrassed at being able only to 'wave his right arm ineffectively' when attempting to return Fascist salutes.7 The implication of Heffernan's story was unmistakeable. Whether he might have wanted to or not, and assuming he understood the controls, Fairbairn would have had great difficulty in effectively controlling a Hudson in anything other than level flight. The later experience of David Campbell in the operation over Rabaul that brought him his DFC illustrates what could happen in a Hudson cockpit when the first pilot could not use his left hand. Shot through the left wrist and minus his little finger, Campbell brought the bullet-riddled A16-130 into land with his right hand on the stick and his only unwounded crew member handling the throttle and flaps.8

Would Fairbairn have wanted to try what he could do with his diminished personal capability? Much as he might have wished to feel for himself the temperament of the Hudson, a responsible Minister would be most unlikely to put colleagues, friends, and crew at risk.9 This is not to say that such behaviour is inconceivable. As the RAF Dambuster leader, Guy Gibson, testified about the British Air Minister Sir Archibald Sinclair, flying in 1943 as a passenger with some senior RAF officers when Gibson had a new flight engineer:

…the Air Minister jabbed a finger in my back and told me to feather an engine. This was done and he seemed very pleased. Then we feathered another one and he seemed even more pleased.

After we had flown along like this for a few minutes, one of the brass hats came forward and told me to unfeather as they were in a hurry. I gave the order, casually, to the Flight-Engineer. Suddenly, to the horror of both myself and the man with goggles on, looking over my shoulder, the two other engines began to feather themselves. Our new Flight-Engineer had pressed the wrong buttons. It was all right, though, because it didn’t take a second to get all four going again.10

7 J. V. Fairbairn, 'Impressions of a Short Visit to Rome', reproduced from The Standard, 19 April 1933, copy courtesy Mary Browne.
9 Andrew Tink’s ‘opinion’ (Air Disaster, p.175) is that 'Fairbairn had taken control of the Hudson, as he had earlier told Storey he would do, intending to land the plane'; and ‘he determined to land the Hudson’ (p.284).
If Fairbairn had asked to be allowed to sit in the cockpit, what would Hitchcock’s response have been? Heffernan’s considered conclusion was that Fairbairn ‘could have badgered a more junior and therefore more rank conscious pilot into letting him have a go at the controls’. He had in fact ‘heard from other pilots that he often asked them to allow him to take over the controls’. What would Hitchcock have done? He might, Heffernan thought, have allowed Fairbairn to sit in the second pilot’s seat:

I cannot imagine any pilot in his right mind allowing an inexperienced pilot to attempt a landing on a strange aircraft, whilst flying in the second pilot’s seat…Hitchcock could have been placed in an awkward position if Fairbairn had asked him to allow him to take over the controls. He could have been placed in a very tough dilemma. If he said ‘No’ would he offend a senior Minister, or if he said ‘Yes’, what latitude would he have given Fairbairn, i.e. would he allow him to fly only in level flight or would he allow him to attempt a landing, knowing that Fairbairn was a reasonably experienced pilot?

Heffernan expressed no doubt about what he would have done himself. It would have been ‘Yes’ to level flight, ‘No’ to landing. ‘With the throttle controls between the two pilots, Fairbairn would have had to take his right hand off the control column to operate the throttles.’ Hitchcock though ‘could have been somewhat over-awed by the importance of Fairbairn’s position and allowed his better judgment to be impaired by this thought.’ What was more likely was that Fairbairn’s very presence in the cockpit could have been distracting.

Heffernan was not alone in pondering the same question. Sir George Jones had not known Hitchcock but he too thought that Hitchcock, indeed any relatively junior officer, was likely to have ‘given way to the Minister’. Jones, who had himself started in the Service in the ranks, was perhaps projecting on to Hitchcock his own struggle for acceptance in a socially unfamiliar environment. Sir Richard Kingsland, an exact contemporary of Hitchcock and certainly not a socially inept young officer, is also on record:

Would Hitchcock have allowed Fairbairn to have a go? Oh, you do as you’re told! If you have the Minister for Air sitting by you, a pilot of infinitely greater experience than Hitchcock…If he said to me when I was in command of the aircraft ‘look, would you let me do this approach and landing?’ I’d say ‘Yes sir,’ because he was a very experienced pilot. Been flying his own aircraft around Australia for a long time. A World War One Pilot…you wouldn’t dare…

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11 Heffernan to CH, 21 April 1978.
13 Kingsland, interview, 3 April 2007, courtesy Geoff Crane.
Kingsland of course had not known Fairbairn and had not seen his physical limitations. Nor had he observed anything of Hitchcock’s flying after their early training together. Sir George Pape was another who had no first-hand knowledge of Fairbairn and did not know Hitchcock. But reflecting 37 years after the two Inquiries in which he had played a leading role he concluded:

I simply cannot believe that Hitchcock would have allowed anybody to bring this aircraft into land, even assuming that Fairbairn pulled a bit of rank on him on the way up and said ‘Do you mind if I take it for a few minutes?’ I cannot imagine that when they got into the vicinity of Canberra he just didn’t say ‘Now look sir, buzz off and get back to your seat.’14

All of those who thought about responsibility for the crash were troubled by the uncertainty and doubts created by the various alternative conclusions. There was no unanimity on the vital questions. But a detached observer could hardly fail to notice that those who were inclined to believe that Hitchcock might have let the Minister take the controls were by implication saying that it was not their former comrade’s flying ability that led to the deaths.

In plain sight

If Herbert Storey’s letter, quickly ‘put away’, filed where it was unlikely to surface, was not the basis of the disturbing idea that Fairbairn might somehow have been responsible for the crash, there were two other possibilities. Fairbairn’s concern to know about the Hudson’s stalling behaviour could have been discussed with other pilots or political colleagues. It is known that the Air Minister had flown to Canberra with Flying Officer Bill Heath in A16-97 a week before the fatal flight. He had flown in Hudsons at least twice in June.15 But his flight with Heath was the first opportunity Fairbairn had after his conversation with Herbert Storey to find out for himself how the Hudson would behave. If he meant what Storey reported him as saying — and the Adelaide headmaster seems to have thought he was listening to more than just idle musings — he might well have tried something while flying with Heath. Knowing that he might be making a number of flights in the coming weeks, he could have used this first one simply to watch and learn. As the accompanying second pilot under instruction was the 6'3" Pilot Officer Keith Eddison, there would have been little room for manoeuvre in the cockpit. If Fairbairn had asked Heath to do anything unusual, no record of his doing so has come to light. No evidence

15 Sydney Morning Herald, 21 June 1940.
of any relevant discussions has emerged. There is not the slightest hint in any of
the Inquiry records that anyone thought it might be worthwhile to press Heath
for information about his flight with the Minister.

On the contrary. It seems that when Heath was called to give evidence before
Justice Lowe his experience with Fairbairn was skated over, in spite of a prompt
from his squadron commander moments earlier. Freddie Thomas, testifying as
Hitchcock’s commanding officer, had been asked if he could name any officers
who had flown A16-97. ‘Flying Officer Heath, at present in Court, had flown it
on the previous occasion.’ When was this? What was the trip? Seemingly rattled
by Dean’s questions, Thomas is reported as saying: ‘He carried out a trip of a
very similar nature. On the 13th [sic] of the Eighth he had taken the Minister for
Air and other passengers from Essendon to Canberra and returned.’

As soon as Thomas had finished his testimony, Heath was sworn and examined.
Questioned for just four minutes, Heath spoke of ‘five passengers’ on his flight
to Canberra in A16-97 but he did not say that the Air Minister had been one of
them. Nor did he name his other passengers, including Sir Harry Gullett, Murray
Tyrrell, and the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Frank Green. Both Lowe
and Dean seemed satisfied simply to learn that Heath had noticed nothing
abnormal about the machine; that in Dean’s words it ‘behaved properly’. Heath
did not mention that he had also taken A16-97 up the day before his Canberra
trip to test its compass and radio. There had been three other junior pilots and
two airmen with him on a flight that lasted two hours and 20 minutes. In later
years, his sons remember, he would be troubled by the possibility that he had
failed to notice something about the aircraft that should have been attended to,
something that might have contributed to the fatal crash a week later.16

George Pape, understanding full well that his brief was to restrict the ambit
of the Inquiry rather than widen it, had no questions for Heath. Perhaps Pape
had been quietly warned that Heath’s discretion could not be relied upon.17
Even if they had not seen Herbert Storey’s letter, in a hearing two weeks after
the crash it is hard to believe that the rumours about Fairbairn being alongside
Hitchcock had not reached Lowe, Dean, or Pape. If anything was likely to deter
them from asking about what happened on Heath’s flight it was surely the high
degree of probability that the Air Minister’s curiosity would have led him into
the cockpit; and, once there, to have brought him into conversation with the
seasoned flying officer at the controls. In his report Lowe referred to Heath’s

16 W. P. Heath, Flying Log Book, 4, 5 Aug. 1940; Hon. Tony Street, interview, 8 Dec 2009; Daryl Heath,
telephone interview, 15 Feb. 2010. After the war Heath would farm on a soldier-settlement block a few miles
from the Streets’ property at Lismore where his older son Willy and Tony Street would become friends.
17 A confidential report by ‘Moth’ Eaton in 1945 graded Heath as a ‘plodder’ on mental alertness, ‘slow to
appreciate subtle points’. The subjective and idiosyncratic nature of these reports needs to be remembered
(NAA: A9300, HEATH WP).
mention of ‘five passengers’. But there was no allusion to Squadron Leader Thomas’s revelation, during his testimony in camera, that Fairbairn was one of the five. The Minister’s presence in a Hudson a week before the fatal crash was to be quietly overlooked.18

Valuable as evidence of Fairbairn’s behaviour on his penultimate Hudson flight might have been, more telling would have been the discovery at the crash site of his body in a place where no passenger could be expected to be. Here we encounter a conspicuous lack of official interest in pursuing the inevitably distressing facts. ‘Del’ Wilson alone asked direct questions, almost casually, and only to Pilot Officer Winter:

Have you any remarks to make about the position of the bodies?…From the outside of the aircraft only four bodies were visible in the back of the machine; the others were bunched up together and covered with debris.19

I am more concerned with those close to the Pilot. You could not give any information about that?…No; there were a number of bodies together.

After Winter, Flying Officer Ronald Wilson was called and examined briefly. Wilson explained that when he arrived at the scene the fuselage had ‘practically finished burning’. Unsolicited, he added, ‘I saw one body quite clear where the door of the machine would have been.’ Arthur Dean, who had just established that Winter had observed nothing extraordinary when he saw the aircraft in the air, now seized the opportunity to ask if Wilson had seen where the bodies were. He had seen four immediately: in addition to the one where the door would have been, two were about six feet ‘in front’, and another fell out after a ‘mild explosion’.20 ‘You could not identify any of the bodies?’ ‘No I went to the body by the door but could not recognise it.’ Lowe wanted to know what Wilson had meant by ‘in front’; did he mean inside the fuselage? No, they were a foot or so outside. Wilson was not asked about the remaining bodies whose location he had marked in a sketch for the Coroner. Flight Sergeant Smith’s story differed suggestively. He spoke of seven bodies ‘in the nose of the machine’, but quickly added that they were ‘not in a heap, but spread over the…full fuselage of the machine’. Again, the crucial question was asked in the negative: ‘You could not identify any of the bodies?’ ‘No. There were three near the tail and the other seven were forward.’

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19 Winter had told the Service Court he ‘could see about four or five bodies on the portside of the aircraft’ (NAA: A705, 32/10/2733).
20 Wilson had signed a statement for the Coroner on Aug. 26 which was originally typed as: ‘I didn’t see any people or bodies there.’ He then inserted and initialled changes so that it read: ‘I did see four people or bodies there.’ Coroner’s Court Inquest Papers, now at NAA: A6079, MO 625.
The RAAF assessors showed no inclination to extract more information from the Service witnesses or to reconcile what were obviously discrepant observations. Nor did they collate what the Air Force personnel recalled with the unmistakeable and more precise clue that had been in plain sight for two weeks. Fire station chief Bill Maloney, among the first at the scene, had told Senior Constable Brodribb the day after the crash that all 10 bodies were ‘packed forward’.21 This was not strictly true, as Crosdale had been found in the rear. But, more significantly, Maloney testified for the Coroner that there were three bodies in the cockpit. No one questioned this very specific observation. Hitchcock and Wiesener should certainly have been in the cockpit. The unasked questions were: who was the third? And was it possible to say with any degree of certainty where he had been?

That Maloney’s observations did not prompt further questions is all the more remarkable in view of a report that had appeared in the Daily Telegraph on August 14. Ten minutes after six bodies had been removed from the wreckage, ‘the other four bodies were seen in the forward part of the machine. They were the bodies of the air crew.’ Only in one case were the features recognisable, the Telegraph reporter said. It was later established that one member of the crew, Charlie Crosdale, had been at the rear of the aircraft and was most likely to have been the person who released the door and tried to escape at the moment of impact. Palmer, the radio operator, would have been expected to be in his cubicle directly behind the two pilots. His identity disk was found among the ashes. But who was the fourth man in ‘the forward part of the machine’?

None of the firemen had been questioned either by Murphy and Winneke or by Lachal and his team. Strictly speaking, there was no reason to suppose that Maloney, Kearney, or their colleagues could contribute anything to an understanding of the causes of the crash. But even the possibility that there could have been a person other than the two pilots in the front of the aircraft ought to have sounded alarm bells. The Director-General of Civil Aviation had subtly signalled this in a teleprinter message to the Secretary of the Attorney-General’s Department on August 23. Arthur Corbett had been responding to a telephone call to the Minister’s private secretary by Major H. E. Jones, ‘the chief investigation officer’ of the Commonwealth police. The information, ‘furnished for inquest purposes’, consisted substantially of the procedure required of commercial aircraft pilots when taking off and landing. Brief details of the actual events at Essendon and A16-97’s flight and approach to Canberra were provided. For no declared reason, possibly in response to an unwritten question

from Jones, Corbett also inserted this sentence: ‘No passenger is allowed to enter the cockpit of a civil aircraft in flight.’ This was territory under-explored by the Coroner and the Air Force investigation and Inquiry.

For his part, Justice Lowe quickly appeared satisfied that only those who should have been in the cockpit were there when the aircraft left Essendon. ‘Del Wilson’ had put a leading question to the Laverton duty pilot: ‘You cannot say whether the Minister for Air was sitting next to the pilot?’ Pilot Officer J. B. Wilson did not reply directly. The only person he had actually seen in the plane, he said, was Dick Elford, seated towards the rear, near the door. That being the case there was no requirement that evidence be led to the court concerning relevant Air Force regulations or practice. Confining themselves to the narrowly defined suggestion that someone other than the pilot might have been in control of the aircraft, both Arthur Dean and Charles Lowe ignored what might have been thought of as the ‘lesser charges’. Yet, if Maloney was correct in reporting the finding of three bodies in the nose, there were implications that should have prompted questions. The incuriousness of Lowe and Dean is all the more difficult to excuse given that the morning newspapers on August 27 reported Maloney’s statement to the Coroner the previous day that ‘three were in the nose of the plane’. At least some of the readers of the Canberra Times, and other newspapers which reported Maloney’s testimony, must have known that there should only have been two men in the cockpit.

If there were three bodies in the nose of the crashed aircraft, whose were they? Those who went to the crash and removed the bodies were unanimous in saying that it was impossible to identify any of those they brought out of the wreckage. Flying Officer Wilson, who claimed to be the first person on the scene, told Police Sergeant Ivan Perriman the next day that when he arrived he saw four bodies ‘even then not recognisable’. He went on to say ‘Each body, as it was removed from the wreckage, was scrutinised by me, but not one was in any way recognisable.’ In his own words, rather than the police sergeant’s stilted paraphrase, Wilson told Justice Lowe that he had seen four bodies immediately he arrived but could not identify any of them. ‘I went to the body by the door but could not recognise it.’ Flight Sergeant Clifford Smith stated that, when he reached the scene at the same time as the ambulance, the fire was burning from near the cockpit ‘from fittings and personal effects’. It was too hot to approach.

22 NAA: A6079, MO625. Although Commonwealth authority over civil aviation had been rejected in a 1937 referendum, a combination of regulations resting on external affairs and trade clauses of the constitution, international conventions, unfettered power in the territories, and complementary legislation by the states had provided an effective national regime by 1938.

23 Lowe Inquiry transcript, p.43. NAA: A705, 32/10/2729.

24 Canberra Times, 27 Aug. 1940.
He saw three bodies, one near the safety door and two towards the port wing where the fuselage was burnt. All were ‘burnt beyond recognition’. A fortnight later Smith was questioned by Arthur Dean before Justice Lowe:

In what part of the ‘plane were the bodies lying? — One was lying near the exit door at the rear. I cannot say whether it was inside or outside. It could possibly have rolled out afterwards. There were two more bodies about a yard forward and the rest were in the nose of the machine.

Were they all mixed up with the remains of the machine? — They were not in a heap, but spread over the position of the full fuselage of the machine.

Smith could not identify any of the bodies — the three he said were near the tail or the other seven forward.25

None of those who were engaged in fighting the flames and retrieving the bodies either knew the occupants or suspected that it might be important to determine who was where at the time they perished. Their accounts of where the bodies were found are replete with inconsistency. Was there anyone else at the scene who could have recognised Jim Fairbairn? As we have seen, the Canberra Times and some other papers had reported that three ministers — Vic Thorby, Fred Stewart, and Percy Spender — had gone out to Duncan Cameron’s farm and seen bodies being retrieved from ‘the head’ of the plane. If any of them had seen something that could not prudently be revealed, there would be good reason for them all to say nothing that could prompt further questions. As it turned out, they were not called to testify by the Coroner, the RAAF inquiries, or Justice Lowe. Maybe they had said that the newspaper story was wrong. But, if any one of them had noticed that three bodies were retrieved from the front of the wreckage, or seen anything to suggest that one of the last bodies to emerge was their colleague Fairbairn, they would be in no rush to broadcast their observations. They might have had nothing to offer to investigators. Whatever they knew or suspected, if they said anything at all, it was unlikely to have remained a secret for long.

Two final clues may be considered. First, there was a barely explicable flaw in the reasoning behind Group Captain Wilson’s identifications of the bodies of the two pilots he was shown at the morgue. Theirs were the last two bodies to be identified. And he distinguished them on the basis that one was clearly older than the other, believing erroneously that Hitchcock was 10 years older than Wiesener rather than 18 months younger. The one feature that would have truly distinguished the two was the great difference in their height. Wiesener was nearly seven inches taller than Hitchcock. The question arises therefore: was Wilson actually looking at what remained of the bodies of Hitchcock and Wiesener? Or is it possible that there was confusion between Hitchcock and Wiesener?

25 NAA: A1378, 4/170, 166; A705, 32/10/2729.
Fairbairn? We know that one body had already been identified as Fairbairn’s by Dr Mackellar and Percy Hayter. However, there was a discrepancy between the versions provided by the two men. Hayter, who of course knew what to look for, said that he identified 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’. Mackellar’s statement was different. The body he had determined to be Fairbairn’s was, he said, larger than Street’s and there was evidence of a war wound in the left shoulder. In fact, at five feet ten inches, Street was as tall as Fairbairn though he carried less weight. And Fairbairn’s war wound was not in the left shoulder.

From these various inconsistencies an alternative picture emerges. If Hayter did not in fact see all the bodies — and his testimony indicates that he mainly responded to what Mackellar was telling him — his later description was not an eye-witness report but, rather, a statement of what he knew would be accepted as unique identifying marks. In the hurry to complete a horribly confronting task, could Mackellar have incorrectly labelled some of the remains? Wilson understood that he was being asked to distinguish between two pilots, one of whom he would say appeared to be significantly older than the other. In the absence of any portions of uniform with insignia of rank it is understandable that he might conclude that an older one was a man he knew to be the more senior flight lieutenant. But it is at least possible that a plainly older body — if indeed there was anything to suggest the age of the bodies — was that of Fairbairn lying next to Wiesener. If the remains of the three bodies recovered at the same time from the front of the plane were brought together to the morgue and placed there side by side there was evidently potential for confusion. Neither Hayter nor Wilson knew either of the pilots. Wilson might have recognised Fairbairn but he thought that the ministers had been dealt with earlier. Mackellar, told to look for evidence of wartime injury, was vague about what he found. His reference to evidence of a war wound in the left shoulder could not be a description of Fairbairn’s shattered right elbow. Whatever he saw, his description is strikingly inconsistent with Hayter’s knowledgeable description of what the doctor should have seen.26

What is undeniable is that several of the identifications reported to the Coroner can only have been, at best, conjectural.27

26 Mackellar signed a statement referring to a war wound in the left shoulder; but in a typed copy in the Commonwealth Police files ‘left’ is struck out and replaced by ‘right’ (NAA: A1378, P8903). Tink (Air Disaster, pp.190, 214), notes that ‘there was no attempt to question’ Inquest witnesses who had seen bodies in the wreckage about whether either of the two bodies marked in the cockpit area in Flying Officer Wilson’s drawing had ‘an injury to its right arm’. ‘With Fairbairn’s disabled right arm an obvious identifier, it would have soon been obvious whether or not his body was one of those in the cockpit’ (Tink, p.195). Fireman Jim Kearney recalled: ‘I don’t think any of them had an arm or a leg left’ (interview, 23 July 1977).

27 Speaking to an ABC television reporter at the air disaster memorial site on 13 Aug. 2013 Andrew Tink said that he had not noticed Wilson’s error about the ages of the two pilots until it was brought to his attention after the publication of his book. He said the evidence is definitive that mistakes were made in the identification process and concluded that the body identified as Hitchcock’s was actually Fairbairn’s. He restated this view for a forum at Questacon in Canberra on 14 Aug. 2013 hosted by the ACT Australian Science Communicators and the Australian and New Zealand Forensic Science Society (http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-16/new-questions-raised-over-canberra-air-disaster/48933547&section=news).
To add further doubt, there is the recollection of John Harrison, Fairbairn’s companion in the flight around Australia in July 1940. Interviewed by the RAAF historian Chris Coulthard-Clark 50 years later, Harrison is said to have recalled: ‘hearing afterwards on 3 or 4 occasions that when police got into the Hudson’s wreckage…they found the skeleton of a big man in the pilot’s seat’. Harrison went on to say that Fairbairn was ‘a big beefy man of 15–16 stone, like the average police constable’. There are several troubling elements here. Police were present when some bodies were removed from the wreckage but they did not get ‘into’ it. Fairbairn in 1940 was no longer an athletic sportsman but contemporary photographs and film do not make him appear as heavy as Harrison suggested. Harrison admitted that he could not remember when he heard the stories — he was not protecting sources, ‘just repeating hearsay current at the time’. If the questionable elaborated detail of the hearsay is discounted, we are left with one challengingly improbable thought: that Fairbairn might not only have been in the cockpit but actually sitting in Hitchcock’s seat.

**The balance of probabilities**

What can properly be concluded from the surviving evidence? After weighing what is known with what can be inferred and deduced it is possible to reach a view that is at least consistent with the incontrovertible facts. When A16-97 was on its final approach to Canberra aerodrome the captain of the aircraft, Bob Hitchcock, would have been in the pilot’s seat on the left of the cockpit. Notwithstanding Harrison’s hearsay it is scarcely conceivable that, with the lives of six important passengers in his hands, Hitchcock would have surrendered his seat to Fairbairn or that Fairbairn would have been foolhardy enough to displace him. In the normal course, Dick Wiesener would have been in the second-pilot’s seat alongside Hitchcock. Wiesener was taken on the flight in order to familiarise himself with the Hudson; and the appropriate place from which to do that was next to the man in command. In the previous week Hitchcock had gone up in A16-9 with Ryland as first pilot to learn about right-hand-seat flying. The next day, August 8, he had himself instructed several junior members of the squadron on instrument take-offs and right-hand-seat flying. The potential use of the dual controls was fresh in his mind.

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If Fairbairn were minded to see for himself what happened under certain conditions he might have asked to change places with Wiesener. Or it could have been suggested that Wiesener move forward into the glazed nose of the aircraft. Designed as the navigator or bomb-aimer’s station, the glass house in the nose was ‘a wonderful grandstand’. It offered, as a British journalist who flew on an operation with Coastal Command the following year described it, a ‘clear view in all directions except behind’.\(^2^9\) If Wiesener had clambered into the nose before the take-off from Essendon, it would have been impossible for him to return to the second pilot’s seat. The companion way would have been obstructed by the dual control; and the second seat would have had to be dismantled. That such a possibility was in the minds of Charles Lowe and Arthur Dean may be inferred from a very carefully worded sentence in the Inquiry Report’s narrative of events. Immediately following the point at which the ‘unusual’ delayed take-off from Essendon is described, it was noted that no explanation had been given although ‘several suggestions therefore were made’. Two suggestions are mentioned: that the port engine had taken some time to start, possibly because the mixture was ‘a little rich’; and that the pilot was ‘not quite ready to go’ and signalled some Moth aircraft on the ground to take off.

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Then, it will be recalled, a new paragraph concludes the section: ‘No one was seen to get out of or enter the aircraft during this delay and eventually the plane made a perfect take off and headed towards Canberra.’

‘Del’ Wilson had in fact put it to Assistant Control Officer J. J. Williams: ‘Nobody got out of the aircraft there?’ The response was carefully qualified: ‘No, nobody that I could see.’ There is no evidence that any further effort was devoted to seeking testimony from the many scores of men who might have been able to see the aircraft while it was idling at the eastern boundary of the aerodrome. But the 10 minutes spent warming the engines out of the wind, and four or five further minutes stationary after turning into the wind, could easily have been thought to be just the amount of time necessary for Wiesener to squeeze past the rudder pedals into the nose. Or to get out of the aircraft via the safety door and then, the aircraft having turned around and concealing him, climb up through the bomb-aimer’s window. The window could be partially opened and provided an emergency way out via parachute. A tiny pencilled note in the margin of a minute sheet in the headquarters file on the Air Court of Inquiry shows that the question was being asked: ‘¼ hr delay at Essnd Wiesener’.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the otherwise unexplained delay makes sense best in the context of Fairbairn’s expressed intention to Herbert Storey. The Minister wanted to see for himself; but he and Hitchcock did not need to be told that others might frown on an unauthorised presence in the cockpit. Hitchcock had been practising flying from the second seat. If John Harrison is to be believed, it would have been the right-hand seat where Fairbairn would have chosen to be. In his testimony in 1990 Harrison recalled the Minister’s insistence in their round-Australia flight on piloting from the right-hand seat of the Q6. ‘This was because Fairbairn liked to have the machine’s throttles on his left.’ The partially incapacitated flyer required Harrison to navigate from the pilot’s seat.

If Fairbairn was sitting in the right-hand seat next to Hitchcock as they approached Canberra, it is possible to construct a plausible scenario that explains an otherwise unlikely lapse of airmanship. It is instructive here to bear in mind the cockpit configuration as described by wartime Hudson pilot Andrew Hendrie:

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31 NAA: A705, 32/10/2729: The Advertiser, 29 Aug. 1940, reported Wilson’s words not as a statement to which assent was sought but as a question: ‘Did anybody get out of the plane?’ to which the answer was ‘No’.
32 P/O Wilson mentioned two possible eye-witnesses: P/O Shiel and ‘an Instructor’ (NAA: A705, 32/10/2733).
33 John White [AWM] to CH, (email), 25 Aug. 1940; NAA: A705, 32/10/2733. In ‘Overnight’ with Trevor Chappell, ABC Local Radio, 8 May 2013, Tink said that Hitchcock told Wiesener to go and sit in the main cabin.
There was room below the cockpit instruments on the starboard side for the navigator to pass down into the nose of the aircraft. The location of vital controls such as those for flaps, undercarriage and fuel tank transfer, enabled them to be reached by the navigator or wireless operator if necessary.34

We have seen Heffernan’s observation about the positioning of the throttles. On a pedestal between the two pilot’s seats there were normally three cranks: one trim for the ailerons, one for the rudder, and the one nearest to the pilot for the elevator. With dual controls fitted, there were double sets of rudder pedals and two control columns. At a critical moment, if an adjustment was necessary to the trim of the aircraft, Fairbairn would not have had the knowledge, skill, or possibly even the strength, to do what was required. It was only six weeks since there had been a relevant discussion at Air Force HQ following the fatal crash of Flight Lieutenant Jim Hamilton in A16-58. The air cadet who had died with Hamilton had been there, not as a second pilot but as an ‘assistant…to operate auxiliary gear by hand should the emergency have arisen’. Wing Commander Simms, commanding No. 6 Squadron, had suggested that the duty of an assistant could be carried out by ‘an intelligent airman’. The essential point was that someone capable needed to be next to the pilot.35

Another theory, offered by Dick Wiesener’s friend Bob Dalkin, must also be considered. One of the checks for both take-off and landing the Hudson was to ensure that the castered tail wheel was locked to assist in directional stability. It was the second pilot’s job to check and advise the pilot ‘tail lock OK’. The knob on the lever for the tail wheel was almost identical, and of similar length, to the lever for activating the Sperry automatic pilot. Exactly two months before the crash of A16-97, the Director of Operations and Intelligence (‘Dad’ Bladin), writing for the CAS, had drawn attention to one of four Hudson accidents when the pilot ‘landed with tail wing unlocked and swung’.36

Someone unfamiliar with the Hudson’s controls could have mistaken a raised automatic pilot lever as indicating an unlocked tail wheel. With the throttles half-way back and the pitch of the aircraft well forward, Hitchcock’s view of the other controls might have been partly obscured. His attention would in any case have been directed primarily to the ground. If Fairbairn were to tell him that the tail wheel was not locked he might have supposed that the Air Minister had either failed to lock it on take-off or unlocked it when they were in the air.

34 Hendrie, *Seek and Strike*, p.37.
35 NAA: A705, 32/10/2602.
36 ‘Service Training in Hudson Aircraft’, 13 June 1940, NAA: A705, 32/10/2478. An Anson crash with multiple fatalities at Richmond late in 1938 was attributed by the Court of Inquiry to a member of the crew roughly operating the handle that trimmed the elevators, believing it to be the handle for winding down the wheels (Hewitt, *The Black One*, p.162).
In either case it was something that imperatively had to be fixed. Attempting to correct what looked like a dangerous unlocked tail wheel by depressing the automatic pilot lever would, in Dalkin’s opinion, ‘have been instantly disastrous, the aeroplane would have just fallen out of the sky’. Whether or not Dalkin was right about the proximate cause, we also have Paddy Heffernan’s assessment: ‘unless I can be assured that the definite cause of the accident was determined, I have a feeling that this “flicking” characteristic, when near the stall, of a Hudson, could have been the basic cause of the accident’.

All the official Inquiries adopted the assumption that Hitchcock alone was at the controls as A16-97 approached Canberra. With the exception of Wing Commander Tony Carr, whose recorded contribution as one of Justice Lowe’s assessors was meagre, the Inquiry teams were limited in their familiarity with the layout of the Hudson cockpit. They were in ignorance of the manual that would have told them about the critical requirement that the tail wheel be locked, and the second pilot’s role in ensuring this was the case. The RAAF officers might perhaps have seen Bladin’s June circular referring to an accident caused by an unlocked tail wheel and the need for the ‘closest personal supervision’ by unit commanders and other officers responsible for training and maintenance ‘to ensure thoroughness’. But, among the torrent of communications from headquarters, this admonition might have made little impression on officers with more pressing responsibilities. What is clear from the court transcripts is that those entrusted with inquiring into the causes of the accident were not looking hard for evidence that someone other than the first pilot was at fault. Knowing that Wiesener was new to the Hudson, there could only be embarrassment for the RAAF in exploring possible error by so inexperienced a second pilot with the lives of six important passengers in his hands.

But, as Carr certainly knew, and Murphy and Wilson would have understood, even if Fairbairn had been called upon to do nothing, the very presence of the Air Minister, ‘chatting away’ as ‘Tich’ McFarlane speculated, would have been a dangerous distraction for a pilot intent on showing himself to advantage. Is there anything else to suggest that Hitchcock’s normal landing approach might have been compromised? The evidence of the very experienced pilot Ray Winter provides an important clue. Two days after the crash he was questioned closely by the Service Court of Inquiry:

Q. As Duty Pilot, did anything appear abnormal about the circuit and a half that the aircraft did of the aerodrome before the crash?

38 ACdre P. G. Heffernan to CH, 7 April 1978.
A. Only the fact that the aircraft came over the aerodrome so high and lost height so very gradually in the circuits. Actually his airmanship seemed to be above average.

The Court did not pursue this point. It evinced no interest in the fact that Hitchcock was making a very gradual descent from a considerable height. Knowing that there was a second pilot under instruction in A16-97 — if not suspecting the presence in the cockpit of the Air Minister — might they not have brought to mind the policy that the height at which a first pilot was to take over for landing from an airman pilot in training on twin-engined aircraft was 2000 feet? However, when the RAAF came to issue its ‘Informative Circular Relative to the Accident…’, they did emphasise that ‘numerous witnesses…practically everyone stated that the aircraft appeared to be flying slower than usual’. What credence could be given to this ‘constantly recurring impression’? The fact that a Hudson squadron had been stationed at Canberra for ‘some considerable time’, and that the two-engined Douglas airliner (similar in size to the Hudson) was landing there twice a day, meant that it deserved ‘serious consideration’. What was not divulged was the nature or extent of any serious consideration. Did anyone contemplate why the aircraft might have been flying more slowly than would have been expected? Or why it appeared to have begun its descent so gradually from a greater height than normal? Would it have seemed plausible that the pilot was showing just how close he could go to stalling the aircraft without actually doing so?

The Air Force Court apparently did not seriously consider the testimony of Harry Southwell, who was barely three-quarters of a mile from the scene, that ‘as the nose went down the engines appeared to roar’. Southwell (and others) had spoken of the aircraft appearing to roll over on to its back but Jack Ryland and Ernie Hey, in secret evidence, had dismissed the possibility that this could have happened. The civilian witnesses were clearly regarded as unreliable. Hilton Clothier, who was even closer than Southwell, said that it ‘may have appeared’ that the aircraft was turning on its back. Clothier had also testified to hearing ‘a crackle as though it was trying to pick up just before the nose went down’. Questioned closely by the Air Force Court, Clothier re-phrased: it appeared to him as though ‘it had been throttled down and then picked up’. It was an acceleration, an increase of noise, rather than a spluttering — the words were suggested by Lowe and Dean. It was at that point that Clothier’s credibility crumbled when he insisted, in the face of incredulous cross-examination by Wilson, that he saw flame coming over the top surface of the starboard wing for two or three seconds before the aircraft hit the ground. It was not coming

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40 The policy prohibited airman pilots (also known as driver pilots) in training from landing a twin-engined aircraft unless they were thoroughly conversant with flying on one engine, including turns with and against the good engine, and landings with one engine (NAA: A 705, 208/1/1383).
from the exhaust. ‘Was it a big blaze?’ Wilson asked. Yes it was. It extended six or seven feet, Clothier told Carr. But to Wilson’s final query, ‘Was there a streak of flame?’, the blaze had shrunk to ‘a wisp of reddish flame’ for ‘only a matter of a fraction of a second’. Other witnesses, asked if they were in a position to see, uniformly said they observed no flames. Yet, evidently troubled by the possibility that the aircraft had been alight before it hit the ground, Lowe asked for Pilot Officer Winter and Flight Sergeant Smith to be recalled: both were clear that they saw neither fire nor smoke.

Asked by Carr if he had heard any sound of an engine backfiring before he saw the flame, Clothier had another attempt at describing what he heard: ‘It was like an engine trying to pick up. It may have been a backfire.’ With two witnesses concurring that they had heard something like a roar or possibly a backfire, the Court then asked Darcy Vest whether the engines appeared to be functioning normally:

A. Quite normal until it took the spiral dive to the ground and I cannot remember any engines going.

Q. You never heard any sudden burst of engine coming on?

A. No, none whatever.

It had previously been established that Vest was a mile to a mile and a quarter away from the aircraft — considerably further than Southwell and twice as far as Clothier — and that he could not remember hearing the engines. Not all of the subsequent witnesses were asked about a ‘crackle’ or a surge of engine power. Fred Tetley seems not to have been asked any questions at all after he testified that he saw the aircraft diving towards the ground. ‘It appeared to me just before it hit the ground to straighten a little. The aircraft struck the ground and immediately burst into flames but I heard no noise.’ Dudley Lalor was next to be asked if the engines of the aeroplane appeared to be ‘functioning normally’. ‘I could not tell,’ he responded, ‘as I was in a closed car and could not hear the engines at all.’

Taken together with the relatively shallow angle at which A16-97 hit the ground — 40 or 45 degrees according to some, 60 to 70 degrees to others — there are good reasons for believing that Southwell and Clothier heard what they said they heard. The garage mechanic, O’Brien, also testified that ‘As it dived, the motors seemed to make more noise to me; they seemed to rev. faster.’ ‘They sounded as if they were opening up?’ ‘Del’ Wilson asked. ‘Yes.’

What therefore appears to have happened is that Hitchcock did his best to head for a relatively clear patch of ground. As Dudley Lalor had told reporters hours later: ‘As the machine neared the ground in its final plunge it seemed to me that
the pilot made a superhuman effort to right it.’ Hitchcock had ‘reduced the angle at which it was hurtling to the earth’. He did what ‘Tich’ McFarlane would say years later he himself would have done: ‘I would have poured the power on and shoved the stick hard forward and, if I had time, scream for somebody to rush up from the back to the front.’ As McFarlane would admit, there would not have been time for anyone to move forward. But he would have ‘whipped up those flaps, shoved the nose down and pulled the power on’. Would this have worked? ‘I probably would have finished up in a molten heap…I might just have made it.’ Irrespective of how Hitchcock came to lose control of the aircraft — about that there can be no definitive answer — his instinct was exactly what it should have been. If he had been another hundred feet or so higher he might have succeeded.

What would Fred Thomas not say?

What can we conclude? Did Fred Thomas designate Bob Hitchcock to captain A16-97 precisely because he was more likely than any of his peers to acquiesce in a request by the Air Minister to demonstrate the characteristics of the Hudson that were causing concern? If it were Fairbairn’s desire to see what the Hudson could do, he might have thought it proper to let the squadron commander know. Even to seek his concurrence. On this question we have testimony from Herb Plenty of a ‘little quiet chat’ he had with Thomas in the late 1950s by which time the former No. 2 Squadron commander was Lord Mayor of Melbourne. Plenty’s view, resting on what Thomas did not say, was that Fairbairn might have been in the captain’s seat:

He probably cleared it, with the Chief of the Air Staff maybe. He’d certainly cleared it with Freddie Thomas who was the commanding officer of the squadron. Freddie was quite happy that Fairbairn could have a touch of the controls…

He was a bit evasive, but he didn’t say to me that Fairbairn was NOT in the left hand seat. Freddie was very cagey about it, because obviously as commanding officer he felt a certain responsibility…he wouldn’t commit himself but he wouldn’t say that Fairbairn was not there.”

41 *The West Australian*, 14 Aug. 1940.
42 McFarlane, interview, 18 April 1978.
43 At this point, Tink (*Air Disaster*, pp.172, 176) refers to Hitchcock’s ‘obedient “old soldier” attitude identified years before by his instructors’. In a photo caption, Tink says Hitchcock was ‘described as “an old soldier type” who unquestionably followed orders’ But what the instructors were concerned about was that, after five years in the Service, Hitchcock might lead the younger cadets astray.
If courtesy dictated that the Minister would ask for approval of his desire to try for himself how the Hudson handled, there remained the issue of nominating a pilot who would be willing to agree. Thomas would have expected some of his flight commanders to be unenthusiastic about obliging the Minister. Bill Heath had been spending almost every day since July 3 putting more than a dozen junior pilots through airmanship training in the newly arrived Hudsons. He had begun teaching them on the same day he finished his own three days of conversion with Jack Ryland in the dual-control A16-6. Had Heath said something to Garrett after the previous week’s flight about the Air Minister’s curiosity? Did Garrett report illness on August 12 as a convenient way of avoiding what he believed would have been an ill-advised and dangerous demonstration? His log book shows that he did not fly on August 12. But he had flown to Adelaide the previous week with Air Commodore Wrigley, flown patrols over the sea at the weekend, and may have been simply taking a break. Garrett was in fact on duty the next morning and, when news of the crash came, he flew to Adelaide with a crew of four and Frank Jefferies with a load of photographic equipment.45

Ryland, though still in his twenties, had been a senior captain and operations manager for Ansett Airways before the war. He was respectful but not overawed by authority. He had flown the Minister to Mascot and back to Laverton via Richmond on June 13 and 14 in Hudsons A16-20 and A16-21. Sir Charles Burnett had accompanied them on the flight up. There is no evidence of what occurred on those flights. However, if Fairbairn had been curious then about the flying characteristics of the aircraft, Ryland would have had the confidence to draw a line beyond which the Minister would not have been permitted to trespass.46 Hitchcock, a little less sure of himself, deferential to the urbane flying veteran, would be least likely to be difficult.

What we do know is that the testimony Thomas gave to the Service Court of Inquiry on the day of the crash concluded with this personal assessment of Hitchcock as a pilot: ‘I consider Flight Lieutenant Hitchcock was slightly above average as a pilot, his instrument flying was good and he was a steady and thorough type.’ Lest there be any suspicion that his opinion was based on hearsay, he added: ‘I make the above assessment having flown with this officer.’47 This was true as far as it went. Thomas made his judgment on the basis of what he knew first hand. Like others he found Hitchcock quiet and unassuming, a man who rarely took part on mess nights. Conceivably he had heard whispers

47 Service Court of Inquiry, p.15, NAA: A705, 32/10/2729. Thomas and Hitchcock had not flown together in Hudsons.
of Hitchcock’s crisis of confidence in 1936; perhaps from ‘King’ Cole, a fellow member of the Naval and Military Club. But, if he had no knowledge of that episode, there was nothing subsequently left in Hitchcock’s personal file that would show that Thomas could have seen the documented disposition of the case.48

‘A steady and thorough type’, was the least a commanding officer could say by way of justifying his selection of a subordinate for a flight that ended so tragically. But the words conveyed more. They were the endorsement of a leader who previously had served in No. 21 Squadron with the then Flying Officer Hitchcock, yet barely knew the man who had been one of his flight commanders. Freddie Thomas, ex-Melbourne Grammar, committee member of the Naval and Military Club, was heir to a large family business. Like Dallas Scott, a Melbourne Grammar school captain, or No. 2 Squadron’s adjutant, Flying Officer Kenneth Ranger, and the other society flyers from Toorak and South Yarra, he inhabited a different world from the tiny timber cottages of Newport.49 Did Thomas know, for example, that Hitchcock was, as his fellow flight commander Ray Garrett said, ‘always subject to air sickness and never got over it (on rough days)’.50 Did he know that the man his friend Jack Graham thought of as ‘a pretty cocky bloke’ had trained for years to build up his body precisely so that he would not be just another puny working-class lad always looking up to those, like his 5’10½” commanding officer, sometimes glowering, born to lead?51

Naturally when I began research on this subject three decades ago, I sought to talk to Sir Frederick Thomas, as he had become. His response was circumspect: ‘My evidence at the Lowe inquiry covered everything I could possibly tell you…You should understand that I had gone overseas before the transcripts were completed and it so happens that I have never seen the final publication.’

Whether or not he had ever seen the transcripts — they were not published and it is unlikely that he would have done so — Thomas’s recollection of the

48 In a telephone conversation with the journalist Frank Cranston 50 years after the event Thomas said he was ‘unaware of derogatory reports on Hitchcock’s personal file’ (Cranston, ‘Note of Telephone Conversation…1990’, Thomas MSS, courtesy of Rob Thomas).
49 Ranger, a 32-year-old WCdr in 1945, was one of seven officers whose request for permission to resign their commissions in protest against ‘futile’ operations late in the Pacific war led to a Royal Commission under J. V. Barry QC. The story is well told in Alexander, Clive Caldwell, Air Ace. For AVM J. E. Hewitt’s recollection of Ranger in 1943 (‘the trivialities and innuendoes of a sick man… without operational or air staff experience’) see Hewitt’s Adversity in Success, pp.85, 109–10.
50 Sir Raymond Garrett to CH, 26 April 1978.
timing of his overseas posting was erroneous. He was assigned to ‘special duties’ at headquarters in April 1941, then posted as a liaison officer to the Dutch Air Force in the Netherlands East Indies from September to November 1941. What, I asked, did Thomas think of Hitchcock? He was ‘a very experienced and capable pilot and for that reason had charge of the special VIP Hudson aircraft’. Finally, he wrote ‘the cause of the crash will always remain a mystery’. Then, as if there was something he wanted to say but could not: ‘PS. “Que Sera Sera.”’ It was much the same enigmatic response that Herb Plenty had received two decades or so earlier. Another decade later Thomas would tell Frank Cranston of the *Canberra Times*: ‘I think I agree with the Air Force finding that it was pilot error. All the evidence pointed that way.’ Tony Street also, understandably hoping to learn more about the circumstances of his father’s death, was never able to get Thomas to talk about it. What is now remarkable is the discrepancy between the recollections of the weekend pilots — who were inclined to find Hitchcock overconfident — and those like Herb Plenty, then a junior pilot officer signed on for a career, who thought Hitchcock was unsure of himself. If Heffernan’s and Wrigley’s recollections, and those experienced men who themselves sat with Hitchcock, are to be believed, this was not an overconfident pilot. If he seemed on occasion to be taking risks, was it just as likely because of nerves, maybe even a bout of air sickness, than an impulse to show off? When competently and sympathetically instructed, as he was by Jack Ryland in his Hudson conversion course, he could meet every requirement. With Ryland there was a rapport. Ryland was not one of the society flyers. He was a professional. He had flown for a living, not for recreation. He had, as another junior officer put it, ‘no side to him’.

It is reasonable to ask: was a nervy pilot, a man who appeared sometimes to take inappropriate risks in the air, the man a responsible squadron commander would assign to fly his own minister and a plane load of very important passengers? Was he the man you could describe a few weeks later as ‘a steady and thorough type’? The anonymous testimony of another No. 2 Squadron pilot, ‘also a Flight Lieutenant, but far more senior in years and flying experience and an airline pilot pre-war’, must be considered here. As paraphrased by the respected aircraft-crash historian Macarthur Job, this pilot had ‘accompanied’ Hitchcock on a

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52 According to Joe Hewitt, Thomas, who finished the war as a Group Captain, was relieved of his command of No. 2 Squadron at the Chief of the Air Staff’s insistence after he had ‘boobed in operations over Bass Strait’. Memories of the appalling crash that had happened eight months earlier on Thomas’s watch would not have been far from the surface. Hewitt was Director of Personal Services in April 1941; I have found no official record to amplify or corroborate his story (Sir Frederick Thomas to CH, 5 Oct. 1979; Air Vice Marshal J. E. Hewitt, ‘Diary for my daughter Part II Sept 1939-December 1948’, Hewitt MSS, Australian War Memorial NAA: A9300, THOMAS FW 250097). Thomas had ceased signing the squadron’s monthly operations reports in February 1940. They were signed by successive adjutants until Frank Headlam arrived as CO in April 1941. Several pages appear to have been removed from the record book in 1940; August, September, and October 1940 are compressed into one page. (Operations Record Book, No. 2 [General Reconnaissance] Squadron, NAA: A9186).

53 Cranston, ‘Note of Telephone Conversation…1990’, Thomas MSS.

54 David Campbell, interview, 24 May 1978.
coastal reconnaissance flight in a Hudson ‘only days’ before the crash. As they came into land at Laverton, Hitchcock’s companion was ‘appalled at the low airspeed at which Hitchcock was making his turns’. He had ‘firmly pointed out that the aircraft was getting much too slow’. Hitchcock ‘brushed the advice aside, telling the senior pilot: “Don’t panic — it’s all right.”’

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The ‘well known and distinguished Australian’ who provided this information could not have been John Ryland, former managing director of Trans Australia Airlines, who had died in 1973. Ryland had in any case been reluctant even to agree that the aircraft had stalled. It was one theory among many, a ‘feasible cause’, in the words put to him by Arthur Dean. One ‘amongst many other things’, no more likely than the ‘highly unlikely’ possibility of engine failure. When asked at the Air Court of Inquiry if he had ever had to question Hitchcock at all or bring to his notice that he was getting dangerously low in any of his flying or in his approaches to land, he was unequivocal that this was not a fault of Hitchcock’s. In saying this, he was implicitly commenting on the finding of the Service Court that A16-97 had stalled because the power approach was flown too low. There is a hint here that Ryland — like George Jones — was uncomfortable with the conclusion reached by Lachal, Stevens, and Pape that placed the blame for the crash on an error of judgment by Hitchcock.

The only person who fits Job’s description is Sir Raymond Garrett. Some 10 years older than Hitchcock, Garrett lived till 1994. He had become a commercial air pilot shortly after graduating from Point Cook in 1926, and had been a member of the Citizen Air Force between 1927 and 1937. Unfortunately, however, neither his own log book nor Hitchcock’s bears out the story in Job’s book. A week after he arrived at No. 2 Squadron where he had been posted as adjutant, Garrett went up as ‘crew’ on patrol to Zealey Point with Hitchcock in an Anson. It was not ‘days’ before the fatal crash but nearly 11 months earlier. Garrett’s name appears in Hitchcock’s log book on only one other day before 13 August 1940. It was June 30, 44 days before the crash. Garrett and Hitchcock were alone, not in a Hudson, but again in an Anson flying from Point Cook to Laverton. Hitchcock took the Anson back to Point Cook solo. Then he returned to Laverton with six passengers. And to end the day he took two of the men back to Point Cook in a different Anson. Each flight took 10 minutes. There is no occasion from the beginning of June onwards when Hitchcock is recorded as engaged in coastal reconnaissance. All this is not to deny the possibility that 40 years after the event Garrett genuinely recalled a disturbing incident involving Hitchcock. But, if it happened at all, it did not happen in a Hudson. Nor was it within three months of the fatal crash.

56 Ryland’s testimony, 27 Aug. 1940, Air Court of Inquiry transcript, NAA: A705, 32/10/2729.
57 Flying Log Book of F/Lt William Raymond Garrett, 18 Sept 1939, photocopy, Garrett MSS, courtesy of Anne Kelly; R. E. Hitchcock’s Flying Log Book, 18 Sept. 1939, NAA: A705, 32/10/2729 attachment 1. Job has confirmed that Garrett was his source (telephone, 21 April 2009).
58 Clark cited the alleged episode with the unnamed ‘ex-commercial pilot’ in an interview 6 Jan. 2008 for the ABC (transcript via Geoff Crane). Tink (Air Disaster, pp.149–50) cites Clark.
Comparisons

The readiness of so many of his former colleagues not simply to accept an official conclusion that the crash was Bob Hitchcock’s fault but to let it be known that they had always had doubts about his ability was deeply hurtful to his widow. Proud of her husband’s achievements, knowing the effort it had taken for him to rise through the ranks to officer status and continue to rise, Olive Hitchcock sensed the condescension that he had endured throughout the years since he was commissioned. Even Rex Taylor later expressed his ‘understanding and belief’ that his friend was ‘lacking in the natural aptitudes which could be expected to lead to a really proficient military pilot, in those days’. True as that might have been, the fact was that Taylor’s friend had until 12 August 1940 come through flying training, five years of military flying, and conversion to the Anson and Hudson without grievous mishap. In a period when the Air Force was riven by arguments about the causes and remedies for multiple flying accidents Hitchcock had survived.

Any defensible assessment of Hitchcock’s Air Force career must be more than a compilation of anecdotes and selected incidents imperfectly if not tendentiously recalled. His ability and performance are best understood when set against the record of his contemporaries. Of the 28 cadets who began the course with him at Point Cook in July 1935, 27 graduated as pilot officers on 16 June 1936. One had been discharged for misconduct. Seven chose the option of joining the RAF. The remaining 20, appointed to four-year short-service commissions on probation from 1 July 1936, were listed in order of seniority:

D. Ashton-Shorter  J. A. Cohen
D. J. Macpherson  A. N. Hick
E. V. Read  W. F. Allshorn
R. F. Wiley  W. J. Keenan
C. T. Hannah  B. G. Braithwaite
N. Ford  J. P. Godsell
E. G. Fyfe  G. J. Quinan
C.A. Houston  J. N. Bell
R. E. Hitchcock  E. J. Eagerty
G. K. Buscombe  T. H. Davies

Having finished in the top half of his class and surmounted the setback at No. 3 Squadron in his probationary year, Hitchcock had gone on to make steady progress. He had proved reliable in his personal life, unlike one classmate who

had been persuaded to resign in August 1938 for being ‘irresponsible in regard to his private affairs’ — a man who bounced cheques could not be trusted with the financial responsibilities that accompanied command.60 He had not been ‘severely reprimanded’ for ‘drunkenness’ by the Richmond station commander, caught out joyriding, taking girlfriends on unauthorised excursions, alarming the inhabitants of a country town by dive-bombing and barnstorming several feet above the main street, or causing irreparable damage to aircraft by carelessness or bravado.61 And, most important, his name did not appear in the summary lists of fatal accidents that so troubled his superiors. He had not been one of the 26 fatalities in 11 RAAF accidents in the five months to 12 August 1940.

Bob Hitchcock and his peers: ‘A’ Course July 1935 entry
(Courtesy of the RAAF Museum)

The contrast with some of his peers is striking. We have seen the sad fates of John Eagerty and Donald Ashton-Shorter. The loss of Charles Houston is another poignant reminder of the thin veil between the flying life of the 1930s and eternity. Like Bob Hitchcock, AC1 Houston had been recommended for a cadetship by the CO of No 1 Aircraft Depot. Before enlisting he had been a fitter and turner in the Newport railway workshops. Director of Training George Jones noted at his interview that the young airman dressed oddly, was rather slow and deliberate, and did not seem to have a strong personality. By

60 Air Board Agenda 2239, NAA: A4181, 15.
61 Dickie Cohen’s strafing of Corowa made the local newspapers but brought no charge. Earlier he had been fined £5 for ‘disobeying in such a manner as to show wilful defiance of authority a lawful command given personally by his superior officer in the execution of his office’, an alleged offence of low flying of which he was guilty on other unobserved occasions but not this one (NAA: A10605, 521/2; Coulthard-Clark, The Third Brother, pp.331–2; Kingsland, Into the Midst, pp.24–6, 39–40).
contrast, and an illustration of the subjectivity of the character assessments which were routinely recorded at successive stages of an officer’s career, another interviewer rated him a strong and pleasing personality. Houston’s outstanding educational record at Clifton and Haileybury Colleges, subsequent trade training at Swinburne Technical College, and a year as a sapper, counted in his favour. His enthusiasm for boxing and long-distance running might also have helped to earn him a place in the A course in July 1935. The sole support of his mother, invalid grandmother, and brother, the 23-year-old Pilot Officer Houston died when his D.H. Moth seaplane A7-40 disappeared in Port Phillip Bay in July 1937.

The accident was no secret, though much of what followed was. As members of the armed services were excluded from the benefits of the Commonwealth Employees’ Compensation Act, Houston’s mother received an *ex gratia* payment of £100. The RAAF’s proceedings in Houston’s case foreshadowed a willingness to conceal inconvenient evidence, a characteristic that was to be exhibited again in August 1940. There was a good precedent for paying Houston’s mother, as George Jones pointed out, but the Director of Training’s recommendation of £150 — double the miserly amount suggested by the Finance Member of the Air Board — was rejected. Although other reasons were given, including that her untraceable husband had a legal responsibility to maintain her, it appears likely that the grudging ‘act of grace’ payment made to Mrs Houston was influenced by facts that were suppressed in the Court of Inquiry into her son’s accident. The Chief Commissioner of the Victorian Police had been tipped off that Houston and his companion, Pilot Officer Ernie Yde, had picked up two young women and taken them for a flight just before the crash. The Commissioner passed the information to the Secretary of the Defence Department. After a high-level conclave at RAAF headquarters a ‘request’ from the Chief of the Air Staff was conveyed to the President of the Court of Inquiry, Fred Scherger, to make enquiries. Having interviewed one of the girls, Scherger was satisfied that they had nothing to contribute to the investigation and decided to make no reference in the Court to the joyride. What he could not expunge from the official record was the finding of the Air Accidents Investigation Committee that the crash was caused by ‘unnecessary low flying’.

Inexplicable as some crashes were, even good pilots could never be absolutely sure of the safety of the machines they flew. It was not Joe Godsell’s fault, for example, that he had to make a forced landing in his Hawker Demon late in November 1937 — it was a defect, well known in Demons, in the water circulation system. Nor could he be blamed for an accident a week later caused

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by a tyre puncture. What all those in authority in the RAAF knew, though sometimes chose to ignore, was that ‘efficient’ pilots could have accidents. Sometimes equipment could be blamed. But there were other possibilities. The death of Pilot Officer L. R. Sutherland during practice for an air display in April 1938 was one of several examples of highly regarded young pilots — he had been runner-up for the Mannock Cup — making fatal errors of judgment. Lance Sutherland, ‘a very sound steady pilot’ according to the Air Accidents Investigation Committee, had attempted a slow roll in a Bulldog too close to the ground, realising the impossibility of the manoeuvre too late.

In an earlier tragic incident, it was not the pilot but two spectators at a demonstration of Demons in Swansea, Tasmania, who lost their lives. Nineteen-year-old Geelong Grammar old boy, Pilot Officer Eric Lansell, failed to clear the unmarshalled crowd as he was taking off, and his axle and wheels struck several spectators. Though Lansell was initially charged with manslaughter, the case did not proceed. His offer of resignation in June 1937 was not approved. He resumed his career, by May 1940 commanding the Advanced Training Squadron at Point Cook, and later serving as a squadron leader with No. 30 Squadron, flying Beaufighters in New Guinea, and ending the war as a Wing Commander.

Overweening self-confidence could be as dangerous as timidity. Regular evaluations of competence were no guarantee against lapses of judgment, momentary inattention, surges of emotion, over-tiredness, illness, alcoholic excess, irrational urges to compete with others, to show off, or to prove something to themselves. Bill Allshorn, for example, who would go on to a troubled command of No. 21 and No. 4 Squadrons yet end the war as a Wing Commander with an Air Force Cross, was court-martialled and stripped of three months’ seniority in 1936 for crashing into a hill some seven miles beyond the limit imposed at No. 3 Squadron for an airmanship exercise. He was not unique.

Worrisome as Hitchcock’s early flying had been, it was no worse than that of his fellow West Australian Hughie Edwards. Edwards had been strongly censured

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63 NAA: A5954, 869/1; MP187, 4/184A.
64 NAA: MP187, 4/186. AVM Ernie Hey, an advanced flying instructor in the mid-1930s, reflected four decades later on sword-of-honour winners who killed themselves because of overconfidence [interview [20 Aug. 1977]]. Winners in the cadet courses immediately preceding Hitchcock’s — E. A Whiteley, A. D. Groom, E. L. Chapman — survived the war. Chapman was not selected for an RAF signals course in 1937 because of ‘his lack of willingness to fly’, but was later recommended for an engineering course (NAA: A705, 163/1/296).
for his low-flying exploits during training, including ‘bouncing’ and narrowly avoiding a train. When he accepted a posting to the RAF, his casual airmanship was soon raising eyebrows. Serving in a Blenheim bomber squadron, he survived a serious accident in Scotland in 1938, ‘severely damaged’ and permanently paralysed below the right knee. The crash, caused by icing, might have been avoided had he observed that he was flying into cumulonimbus clouds. Edwards was not returned to flying duties until April 1940. He was renowned as a pilot whose landings were frequently hazardous. But his fearless insouciance won friends in high places, and a chestful of decorations, including the V.C., eventually attested to his valour in combat.67

To understand the significance of Hitchcock’s survival through over a thousand hours of flying, the records of the Air Accidents Investigation Committee (AAIC) are salutary. The ‘Accident or Forced Landing’ reports fill several volumes between 1935 and 1940. Between 1935 and 1937 alone, the RAAF recorded 219 accidents with nine pilot fatalities.68 During the last month of Hitchcock’s cadet course the AAIC approved a reprinting of their standard form at £2 per 1000 copies. An analysis by the Actuarial Society of America published at around the time Hitchcock began his training is instructive. In the United States the annual mortality rate for airline pilots was 25 per 1000; an hour in the air was estimated to be 80 times more dangerous than an hour on the ground. Mortality risk for airmail pilots was 95 times ‘normal’. For army and navy pilots it was 170 times. Amateur flyers faced a risk of death 255 times greater than the average man.69

For some years before the war, personal accident insurance against aviation accident had been available from major Australian life offices for RAAF officers and other personnel. But generally an extra premium was required, between £5 and £10 per £100 sum assured for coverage of active service overseas. When war came, all the big life offices imposed a restriction on their liability in respect of death on war service outside the country. Unless a premium of £7.10.0 per cent of the sum assured was paid, the liability would not exceed the premiums paid plus interest. A war clause was inserted in new policies that provided for a maximum death benefit of £1000 plus bonuses. Premiums paid in respect of a sum assured in excess of £1000 would be refunded plus compound interest calculated at 3½ per cent. Alert to a gap in the market for RAAF pilots, in April 1940 Bennie S. Cohen & Son, Lloyd’s insurance brokers, of 341 Collins Street, Melbourne, were quoting a premium of 15/- per £100 for a benefit payable on death for ‘period of training limited to 10 weeks’. For six months it was 40/-

69 Unidentified press cutting, ca March 1935, NAA: MP187/1. Modern statisticians would doubtless show the flaws in these risk analyses.
(£2) per £100. For one year, including training, the premium was ‘60s %’ or £3 per £100. These were generous terms offered by the leading Australian firm of Lloyd’s brokers, founded by Oswald Benjamin in 1923, specialists in aviation insurance with an office in London’s Lombard Street. The AMP, of which Joan Wiesener’s uncle was a senior director, was already paying out for airmen who had died in flying accidents; and had recently paid on a policy for Pilot Officer Stanley Thornton, who had disappeared in an operation over Holland in May 1940.

By August 1940, not only had Bob Hitchcock avoided becoming an attrition statistic he had actually progressed in the Service faster than many of those who passed out with him from Point Cook in 1936. He had attained the rank of flight lieutenant in April 1939. His promotion might well have occurred as early as July 1938 had the recommendation of the Air Member for Personnel not been deferred by the Air Board. Flying Officers Read, Hannah, Ford, Fyfe, Buscombe, Macpherson (provisionally, he was undertaking an RAF Signals Course), and Cohen (now qualified as a specialist air navigator) along with Hitchcock eventually went up together, with the approval of the Minister for Defence, Geoff Street. By then another of their number, ‘mentally apathetic regarding flying duties’, had been terminated. Among Hitchcock’s contemporaries still awaiting promotion from flying officer in February 1940 were Norman Hick, Joe Godsell, Geoffrey Quinan, Ralph Wiley, Bill Keenan, John ‘Dinger’ Bell, Thomas Davies, and Bill Allshorn, the last three having slipped a month behind the rest in seniority, being recommended for temporary promotion from 1 October 1939 rather than 1 September 1939.

Whatever might have been the truth about Bob Hitchcock’s flying competence, the incontrovertible fact was that A16-97 was observed to plunge to the ground in a way that Service inquiries concluded was the result of error by the pilot.
Nothing discovered by contemporary investigators would justify a finding that the aircraft itself was defective, although Jack Ryland for one would offer structural failure as a ‘very improbable’ alternative cause: ‘actual breakage of the controls themselves or the wires leading to the control surfaces’. ‘Del’ Wilson had pushed unsuccessfully for some confirmation that a vital cable could have been broken. It was permissible therefore, and logical, to infer by default that Hitchcock was entirely responsible for the aircraft’s stall. Explanations could then be sought in what was known of the pilot’s training, aptitude, experience, personality, and state of mind. Expert witnesses testified that the pilot was appropriately trained and experienced. In 1940, RAAF authorities were content to conclude for the record that Bob Hitchcock lost control at a crucial moment and was unable to retrieve the situation. This was a conventional and comfortable explanation. They had no desire to explore why he might have failed to bring in safely an aircraft on which, by the Air Force’s standards, he was amply qualified. Nor were they eager to highlight the fact that the accident had occurred to what they knew to be a challenging aircraft.
The thought that a respected Cabinet minister might somehow have contributed to, if not actually caused, the crash could be relegated to the realm of unsubstantiated speculation. There was no evidence that anyone else was in control of the aircraft. Normally observed cockpit rules and etiquette would exclude such a possibility. Nevertheless, there were doubts. Just two weeks before the fatal crash, John Harrison had completed a trip around the nation with Jim Fairbairn during which Harrison was ‘a mixture of deputy private secretary, journalist, navigator, wireless operator, and general dogs-body’. As ‘the last person to have sat alongside Jim Fairbairn when he was pilot-in-command’, Harrison would admit privately 38 years later ‘that dual-control possibility haunts me’. It haunted him all the more as he had been in the queue for a seat in A16-97: ‘one of the VIP’s needing a seat in that Hudson is a reason why I am alive today’.73

Of all the witnesses who have expressed a view about responsibility for the crash, none compels more attention than the man who claimed to have assisted in the identification of the bodies and to have reported directly to the Prime Minister. When I interviewed Sir Peter Looker in March 1976 he was candid about many things but careful about what he chose to reveal. I was talking to Looker about his life as assistant private secretary to Robert Menzies in 1940 and 1941 for the television series on Menzies’ life on which I had just embarked. We had been discussing the Prime Minister’s travel arrangements between Melbourne and Canberra. The disaster of August 1940 came up without premeditation. ‘It was a terrible tragedy. And I had the unenviable experience of having to go across and identify the bodies,’ he said. ‘It shouldn’t have happened’. Was the plane overloaded, I asked? At that stage I knew nothing of the allegations about Fairbairn. ‘No, no, somebody was flying the aircraft who shouldn’t be flying it.’ And then he moved the conversation firmly in another direction.74

There was only one somebody it could have been. Thirty-seven years later, I believe Looker was wrong. But it remains an embarrassment that I did not press him then or later to tell me more.

74 Sir Cecil (Peter) Looker, interview, 25 March 1976.