Three Cabinet Ministers and the Chief of the General Staff killed. Six others dead, flight crew and staff. A terrible inexplicable accident. A story so shocking and sensational galvanised the press. There was a scramble for photographs. Cinesound and Movietone newsreel cameramen sped to the scene. Eye-witnesses, people who were happy to tell of what they had seen, would be questioned repeatedly over the next few days by official investigators as well as journalists. Others in demand by the newspapers were those whose good fortune it had been to choose to travel to Canberra another way for the meeting on August 13. No major accident story was complete without expressions of relief and thanksgiving from those who might have been victims.

After the radio stations, the Tuesday afternoon papers had the news out first. They were wrong to report, as ‘The Hand of Fate’, that Sir Henry Gullett had planned to fly up with Jim Fairbairn in his own plane but that both men changed their minds at the last moment so that they could travel with Sir Brudenell White.\[1\] It was closer to the mark to say that the Minister for Customs, Senator George McLeay, was to have travelled by the ill-fated plane, as a ‘special representative’ of the Melbourne Herald reported on the afternoon of the crash. Geoffrey Street had telephoned McLeay on Monday asking if he would like to join him on the flight to Canberra. McLeay declined the invitation, the reporter was told, because he had planned a long conference on the train with his departmental head, the Controller-General of Customs. Not quite true. The meeting, according to the Minister’s private secretary, Bob Willoughby, had been with some ‘motor car people’ on the way up to Albury. McLeay had kept his options open until the afternoon, deciding finally not to take up the offer. The prospect of a post-prandial brandy and cigar in the parlor car might have tipped the balance. Before Willoughby could call Dick Elford to tell him that the seats were not required, Fairbairn himself rang to ask whether McLeay still wanted them. Fairbairn was relieved to find that they would be free because ‘we’re taking Brudenell White up with us’.\[2\] McLeay was to be one of Fairbairn’s pallbearers on August 15.

The Assistant Treasurer, Arthur Fadden, one of the first to hear the news at Parliament House, had also been invited by Fairbairn to join the party, but was already booked on the train. By the time the Herald appeared on Melbourne’s streets, Fadden was acting Minister for Air. The Canberra Times explained the next day that it was ‘inconvenient to cancel the seat’. Fadden later recalled that he had been asked by Fairbairn to give up his seat for Elford so that Elford could

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1 Advocate (Burnie), 14 Aug, 1940.
stay in Melbourne on the night of August 12 to celebrate the first anniversary of his wedding. Like many of Fadden’s autobiographical memories it was a good story marred only by its comprehensive inaccuracy: the Elfords had been married in November 1931.  

No other high-profile escapes were reported. Some fateful decisions rested on personal preferences; some on unavoidable alternative arrangements. But for others a different element played its part.

For one very important person who most certainly could have had a seat, there was no hint in the press of the events that led to his absence from the flight. On the afternoon of Monday, 12 August 1940, Murray Tyrrell, the Minister for Air’s messenger, assistant to his private secretary, was in his office at Victoria Barracks on St Kilda Road, Melbourne. An unenthusiastic Tyrrell had been chosen to join Fairbairn’s official staff in July 1939. Until then Tyrrell’s acquaintance with federal politics had been limited. He had been ruled out of order at an election meeting in East Malvern for the neophyte UAP candidate Harold Holt when asking ‘socialistic questions he couldn’t answer’. Then, as a 17-year-old he had been dislodged from a soapbox outside a baby health centre in Caulfield and frogmarched home by a police sergeant — his offence being to draw a bigger crowd than Harry Gullett, who was speaking at the markets across the road. Tyrrell was an unabashed socialist but had learned not to let his political convictions contaminate his public service life. He had been personally interviewed for the job with the Minister by A. B. Corbett, the Director-General of the new Department of Civil Aviation. Arthur Corbett had known of him previously in the central office of the Postmaster-General’s Department. His quixotic brief from Corbett was to ‘make sure that Fairbairn doesn’t do anything I wouldn’t approve’.

Among Tyrrell’s newer duties was allocating spare seats on RAAF flights arranged for the Air Minister. As the time for his chief to return to Canberra grew closer, he had an eventful few days. Fairbairn himself, his close friend Street, and Tyrrell’s immediate superior, Elford, were all issuing invitations to join the flight. Some ministers temporised. Others declined. Nothing was settled until it was known who had opted for a Monday night rail journey and the train had actually departed. Meanwhile, those who minded the mighty could exert such influence as their seniority gave them. Naturally, if the Prime Minister wanted a seat on a flight, he took precedence over others in the queue or already allotted a place. Knowing that the new Hudson offered superior

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3 Sir Arthur Fadden, *They called me Artie*, Jacaranda Press, Milton, Q, 1969, p.43. Fadden’s false memory of Elford’s supposed first wedding anniversary is quoted by Tink (Air Disaster, p.163), who omits ‘first’ but does not notice the wrong month as well as the nearly nine years since the Elford wedding.

4 ‘VIP’, though not yet coined in 1940, is believed to have been the creation of a British officer responsible for organising wartime flights for ‘very important personages’ whose safety might be preserved by anonymity. For R. G. Casey on a Vip [sic] flight taking the controls of an RAAF Sunderland, a type he had never flown: *Army News* (Darwin), 31 July 1944.
speed and more comfortable seating than the planes previously used, the Prime Minister’s assistant private secretary Peter Looker thought it sensible to reserve two berths on the flight. He himself disliked nights on the train, often sleepless. What happened next was recalled by Looker:

Dick Elford, Jim Fairbairn’s private secretary…came along to me and said ‘how are you going back to Canberra? Are you going back tonight?’ And I said ‘Yes we are, blast it all we’re going and we’re going to sit up all night.’ He said ‘Well look, why don’t you come up with us in the morning?’ And I said ‘How are you going?’ And he said, ‘Well the minister is going to fly up again in a RAAF plane, a Lockheed Hudson, and why don’t you come with us?’ I said ‘that is an excellent idea…what time are you leaving?’ He said ‘Well we’re leaving I think at about eight o’clock or half past eight…’ So I said, ‘Well that’s fine…would you tell the minister…that the P.M. and I would like to come up too.’ So he said ‘Sure I will.’

By this time the P.M. had gone home to 10 Howard St Kew. I rang him through, and I said ‘Look instead of going by train tonight’ — this was about four o’clock on Sunday [sic] afternoon — ‘the Minister for Air is flying up tomorrow morning in a RAAF plane. I’ve suggested that he reserve two seats for you and I.’ I got the full blast: ‘We will go by train!’ So I said ‘Alright.’ So I had to ring up Dick Elford and say: ‘Look, cancel it, the old man won’t agree, we’re going up by train.’

Why did Menzies blast Looker for arranging to fly to Canberra? As a minister and Prime Minister he flew when he had to. Alfred Stirling, one of his last legal pupils and his first private secretary in Canberra, recalled that Menzies had done some private flying with Sir Chester Manifold when both were in the Victorian Parliament. On the Attorney-General’s European trip in 1938 he noted that Bob and Pattie Menzies flew in separate planes. When Stirling, by then working with Stanley Bruce in London, joined them on a visit to Holland and Germany, it seemed that Menzies sensed that it was the fastidious bachelor Stirling’s first flight. He murmured reassuring words that it would be alright.

Sympathetic as he could be to a nervous flyer like Stirling, Menzies’ sentiment was not based on any particular knowledge of aircraft. The Prime Minister’s lack of curiosity about aviation matters was confirmed by Lawrence Coombes of the CSIR Aeronautical Research Laboratory at Fisherman’s Bend. On a visit to CSIR in 1939 Menzies called briefly at the Division of Aeronautics after a

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6 Alfred Stirling, interview, 14 May 1976.
morning with the Division of Industrial Chemistry. He met Coombes and three or four of the senior staff and left showing ‘no interest in aeronautical research or aircraft manufacture’. If he was aware that Coombes was a decorated wartime RAF ace with 15 confirmed victories, and a former member of a ‘joy-ride outfit’ with Charles Kingsford-Smith, he did not show it.7

From the public record there was nothing to indicate that Menzies was reluctant to fly. In February 1939, he was booked, with Jack McEwen, George McLeay, Hattil Foll and their wives, Dick Casey and Vic Thorby, on an Australian National Airways flight from Launceston to Melbourne after a Cabinet meeting in Hobart and a brief tour of the Tasmanian northwest coast.8 In July 1939 he travelled by air from Sydney to Melbourne and then spent 10 days on a tour of South and Western Australia. Five months later, he flew by airliner from Melbourne to Sydney to attend a farewell dinner to Bertram ‘Tubby’ Stevens, the ex-Premier of New South Wales. In April 1940 he had even ventured to join Geoff Street in a flight from Canberra to Melbourne piloted by Jim Fairbairn. Fairbairn had landed the plane on a makeshift landing ground at Seymour to enable Street to visit the Puckapunyal Army camp.9 It was perhaps Fairbairn’s last flight in the Dragonfly before handing it in for government use. An Argus photographer was there to capture the moment with the Prime Minister in the cockpit with the pilot.

Menzies flew on other occasions. But the truth was that he never liked flying.10 His Cabinet colleague Tom White had enjoyed a pleasant flight to Canberra with him one morning in September 1937 and could not resist retailing to his wife ‘The legal gentleman informed me that his feet were very cold — apparently chronic since 1914!’11 Nothing illustrates Menzies’ aversion better than a memorable incident early in 1940 recalled by his assistant private secretary. At the last moment one Friday afternoon, Menzies decided that he wanted to go with his wife by train from Canberra to Melbourne for the weekend. Despite the best efforts of his staff, including a personal appeal by Peter Looker to the NSW Railways Commissioner T. J. Hartigan, there were no seats — all had been commandeered by the Services. No carriage could be added. It would have required a second engine and extra coal that would not be approved because of a fuel conservation policy caused by the miners’ strike. What happened next is best told in Looker’s own words:

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9 Sydney Morning Herald, 13 Dec. 1939; The Argus, 13 April 1940.
11 T. W. White to Vera White, 13 Sept. 1937, T. W. White MSS, NLA MS9148/2/2.
I rang up what was then Australian National Airways — they used to run DC-3s from Canberra to Melbourne — and told them the problem and I said would you have three seats available tomorrow morning? And they said, yes certainly, we’ll make them available for you. So I thought I had shown a lot of initiative and I walked into the P.M.’s office about five or half past five, told him the story, that there were no seats on the train and we’d fly down in the morning and we’d get there just about the same time as if we’d sat up all night.

Well, at that he let fly. He thumped the table and he said: ‘Look, I am Prime Minister of this country. Do you mean to tell me that I cannot have a seat on that train tonight?’ And I said, ‘well that’s what I have been told, and there’s nothing I can do about it, and nothing that the Chief Commissioner of Railways in New South Wales can do about it, and after all we’ll get down the same time and we’ll be able to sleep tonight.’ Of course he loathed air flying, he loathed flying...And he — oh he really tore strips off me.12

Once more having lambasted his young staff member for trying to get him to fly when it was not essential, Menzies arrived in Canberra early on the morning of August 13. ‘It was a bright and sunny day, and I was at work,’ he remembered. ‘A knock came on my door, and somebody walked in. There had been a dreadful air crash, almost within sight of my windows.’ Murray Tyrrell, who had also come up by train — having bribed a railway porter with 10 shillings for seats for himself and Pip Hayter — brought the news to the Prime Minister.13 Tyrrell had accompanied his minister with Harry Gullett and others to Canberra in A16-97 the previous week.14 Shaken by the realisation of how close he himself had come to being one of those in the fallen plane, he told Menzies: ‘I suspected they had [all] died in the crash. I didn’t know. I rang him immediately I knew there was a crash, went and saw him in his office in Parliament House and said I was going out to check at...Canberra airport.’

Menzies was stunned. ‘Just absolutely stunned,’ Tyrrell recalled. The young assistant private secretary knew nothing of the abortive attempt by Elford and Looker to get the Prime Minister on to the aircraft the previous afternoon. Menzies himself said nothing about it. Looker too kept his counsel, realising at once that nothing good could come of such a revelation. Fifteen hours earlier he

14 Flying Log Book, W. P. Heath, 5 Aug. 1940, Heath MSS.
had been ‘growling like mad’ with George McLeay’s secretary Bob Willoughby about ‘having to travel by train while others were lucky enough to get a plane trip up’. Tyrrell was grasping at wisps of hope as he told Menzies:

‘I can’t be certain.’ What happened was that I hadn’t heard the plane go over, you see. By this time I was already at Parliament House. So was Hayter. And I rang the control tower…And the control tower said ‘No it hasn’t arrived yet.’ And then he added almost like an afterthought, he said ‘But there’s a kite just gone into the hill about two miles away and I’ve sent an ambulance.’ I said ‘What sort of kite?’ He said ‘Oh, I think it was a RAAF Hudson.’ I said ‘You bloody fool, send four ambulances. There are thirteen or fourteen people on board.’ He said ‘Well, it’s too late’ or words to that effect, ‘it’s burning.’ And it was.

The distress of the Prime Minister was palpable to all who saw him that day. He had not been to the scene of the accident. ‘He immediately drove out to Government House to interview the Governor-General on urgent constitutional questions,’ the Canberra Times reported the next morning. There were three ministerial appointments to be made and a Chief of the General Staff to replace. Speaking briefly to reporters on the afternoon of the crash he ‘was deeply distressed at the tragedy and made no effort to conceal his emotion’. ‘Mr Menzies Overcome’, the Barrier Miner headlined. ‘To me,’ he said, ‘it is a most grievous personal loss.’ The death of his three Cabinet colleagues ‘does not bear thinking about’. Menzies was seen to be ‘on the point of a breakdown on several occasions’. After a few sentences he broke off his statement, pausing for more than 10 seconds, and ‘brushing his hand distractedly across his forehead: “I am afraid I am not able to talk about it very much. It is a cruel blow.”’ Tyrrell remembered the initial reaction of a man not quite in a state of shock but ‘more than upset to talk rationally about anything’.

Menzies was to describe the event in his memoirs, Afternoon Light, published 27 years later:

Gullett was dead; Street was dead; Fairbairn was dead; the most scholarly and technically talented soldier in Australian history, Sir Brudenell White, whom I had recalled from retirement to be Chief of the General Staff, was dead. And dead with them were other younger men whom I knew, and for whom I had an affection.

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18 Sir Murray Tyrrell, interview, 5 April 1977.
This was a dreadful calamity, for my three colleagues were my close and loyal friends; each of them had a place not only in my Cabinet, but in my heart. I shall never forget that terrible hour; I felt that for me the end of the world had come.19

Late that night, among the messages of condolence despatched to the bereaved families, two telegrams to Audrey Elford were lodged for morning delivery. At 11.47 p.m. officials on behalf of the Commonwealth government conveyed deepest sympathy over the Prime Minister’s signature for the ‘tragic loss that you and all of us have suffered’. Three minutes later an obviously more personal message followed: ‘My wife and I are deeply distressed at today’s tragic disaster. We share to the depth your sorrow and grief... R G Menzies.’20

The next day, when he rose in the House of Representatives, the Prime Minister’s emotion could not be concealed. He had woken to news that German planes had for the third day in succession launched wave after wave of attacks on England. What would soon be known as the Battle of Britain was under way.21 Whatever Menzies knew and feared about the war above the clouds over the southeast of Britain, it was the previous day’s tragedy in Canberra that gripped his mind. If he believed what he read in the morning papers, his friends had been burnt to death: ‘had the fire not occurred the occupants would have survived’, The Argus reported. The Canberra Times ‘had learned’ that he had not known until the crash was reported that the ministerial party was travelling by air. At least one person in the Prime Minister’s office knew this to be false. Peter Looker was well aware that Jim Fairbairn was going to be aboard, even if he had not been told the names of the others. ‘I tried to speak about them,’ Menzies wrote, ‘... It was difficult for me, and for all of us. In the whole history of government in Australia, this was the most devastating tragedy.’ Menzies had not been one to let the world see what was in his heart. ‘It was only in my later years that the feelings in me would occasionally break through,’ he admitted in retirement. Although, he said, he had ‘always had a lot of emotion in me, I learned to distrust its public expression’.22

On this occasion, there was genuine grief and little artifice. This was a man deeply distressed. The extent of the disturbance to his equanimity is glimpsed in the confusion he conveyed in Parliament about the widows of Frank Thornthwaite and Geoff Street. They were sisters, he said. The Canberra Times had said this that morning. A reporter had perhaps heard someone say they were like sisters. But Menzies should have known that they were cousins. The next day at St

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20 Both telegrams were lodged at 10.50 p.m. Elford MSS. Punctuation added.
22 Menzies, Afternoon Light, p.11.
Paul’s reporters noticed that he was ‘weary and haggard’. Nearly 30 years later he wrote of the three Cabinet colleagues: ‘I still mourn for them and carry them in my memory.’ The intensity of the feelings Menzies expressed, both in 1940 and 1967, is unique. He spoke publicly of no-one else so movingly: ‘on that dreadful day I was sad beyond the powers of description; some of my greatest friends were gone’.

When I first read the eulogies and lament in Afternoon Light the revelation of anguish seemed out of character for a man who habitually hid his own sentiments. The questions I began to ask myself were the germ of the idea that impelled me to write this book. Was Menzies simply exhibiting the mixture of relief and guilt so often felt by those who might so easily have been among those who perished? Or was it something more? Did he ask, like Thornton Wilder’s Brother Juniper who had seen the bridge of San Luis Rey snap and precipitate five men and women to their deaths in the valley below: ‘Why did it happen to these people?’ Did he know of the possibility that the pilot’s control of the aircraft might have been compromised by Jim Fairbairn? If others were canvassing that disconcerting idea, could it have been kept from him? There is no evidence to confirm that Menzies was by then informed of the rumours that would soon be reverberating in parliamentary corridors and at dinner tables around the nation. But it seems at least a plausible inference that the stories had reached him. And, if they did, the question that he could scarcely avoid asking himself was: would Fairbairn have restrained his curiosity if the Prime Minister had been among the passengers? Were all those deaths the result of his own insistence on travelling by train? Had his aversion to flying caused 10 other men to die? The questions could be asked. There could be no certain answers.

The public mask of Robert Menzies was rarely dropped. Four years before the crash he had mused about the ‘paradoxical fact’ that people are so ‘inaccessible even in the most crowded places’. ‘We guard ourselves against the prying eyes of others;’ he wrote, ‘we sometimes laugh when we are sad, and assume an air of modest gloom when we are elated, not out of perversity,’ he added, ‘but because we have been taught to believe that to wear our hearts on our sleeves is to forget the lessons of a self-controlled, not to say sophisticated civilisation.’ The ‘sophisticated civilisation’ that Menzies inhabited was one in which appearance and perception were never less important than reality. To exhibit emotion, except by calculation, would be to reveal vulnerability. But, if political exigency demanded self-control, detachment from superfluous information ensured that a leader could remain focused on the decisions that mattered.

23 Sun News-Pictorial, 16 Aug. 1940.
24 Robert G. Menzies, ‘Foreword’, Ambrose Pratt, Sydney Myer: a Biography, Quartet, Melbourne, 1978, p.vii. The foreword was written in 1936 but the book was not published for another 42 years.
Like many successful barristers Menzies was admired for his rapid assimilation of the essentials of a brief. The technique that served him well at the Bar had become instinctual by the time he was a minister. The British businessman Larry Hartnett had observed Menzies closely in attempting to persuade him to support the development of an Australian aeroplane manufacturing capability: ‘He wants to know all the things that seem pertinent to the case but he doesn’t want to dig at all deep. And Bob had no leanings towards what I call practical matters or the technical aspects of a subject.’

When he came to write almost three decades later about the events of August 1940, Menzies portrayed only the harmony and trust he had enjoyed with the colleagues he had lost in the crash. He had a political history to tell, with a message for the next generation about the comradeship and loyalty he had enjoyed. Neither the story nor his dignity in retirement was to be diminished by reviving forgotten witticisms or cruelties, extempore or premeditated. Thus there was no place in his memoirs for observations about Gullett’s ‘whingeing’ voice (which Percy Spender was sure the Prime Minister had found irritating). There would be no repetition of disparaging remarks about Western District wives. No recollection of Fairbairn’s defiant appointment of Sir Charles Burnett or of his occasionally wanting performance. ‘These were all men of character, capable of being difficult, but never capable of disloyalty.’

In Parliament on 14 August 1940 Menzies had naturally spoken of all of those who died — first of Brudenell White, whose abilities were outstanding, a man of ‘lofty character and a gracious personality’. Then of Frank Thornthwaite, ‘a gifted and popular officer’. He had described the 50-year-old Thornthwaite to reporters the previous afternoon as ‘one of the ablest of the younger army officers’. And of Dick Elford, ‘a young man greatly admired by all honorable members who had come into contact with him…on the threshold of what, no doubt, would have been a distinguished, as it was certainly an honorable, career’. The four RAAF personnel, ‘men of skill…on the threshold of life’, were acknowledged. But they were not mentioned by name. There was a collective tribute to the three Cabinet ministers who ‘had their greatest attributes in common’. In a voice ‘charged with emotion’, the Sydney Morning Herald recorded, the Prime Minister praised them all: ‘men of courage and untouched honour, fired by a burning loyalty and enlightened by ability and experience’. Each, Menzies said, had ‘a genius for friendship. They were rare men.’ Harry Gullett’s life was ‘an epic of honourable achievement’. His mind was ‘studious

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26 Menzies, Afternoon Light, p.18.
27 The Examiner, 14 Aug. 1940. According to the Barrier Miner the Prime Minister had paid tribute to Thornthwaite as ‘one of our ageless younger officers’.
and reflective…penetrative and inquiring’. His political work was done with ‘the disinterested zeal of a crusader. Henry Gullett could give and take hard knocks.’

But when the fight was over, even his opponents saw only the grey-haired, studious-looking man with the quick smile, the tender human charm, the capacity for giving a friendship so understanding and so moving that I can hardly bear to speak of it.

Of Jim Fairbairn there was a measured appreciation of ‘immense, though undemonstrative, personal courage…unmatched energy and ability’ in performing ‘the stupendous task of Minister for Air’:

His mind and character were strong, and he displayed an unusual combination of cheerful fellowship with, perhaps, a hint of Scottish dourness. He was slow to speech, but, once engaged, he was gifted in exposition and resolute in advocacy of what he believed to be true.

The deepest feelings emerged for Geoff Street whose principal pallbearer he was to be the next day. Street had brought to the heavy tasks of the Minister for the Army ‘a mind informed by study and experience and sustained by a modest but courageous heart’.

He had a great simplicity which made him the friend of all of us; each of us can say, as I now do, ‘He was my friend, faithful and just to me’.28 In a period of immense personal strain and trial, his steady loyalty meant more to me than I can hope to say. To him the business of government, and, in particular, the business of conducting the administration of war, was a grave personal responsibility. He abhorred flamboyancy and display. But those of us who knew him so well will for long remember those things about him that many may not have realised — his scholarship, his gentleness of spirit, his quiet gaiety and wit, his memories and his love of the great game of cricket, whose standards were his, his honesty of mind.29

Jim Fairbairn, though charming, hardworking, and politically reliable, had never really been close to Menzies. Gullett’s hospitality was a welcome escape from the cares of office; but he was not an intimate. Street, whose enthusiasm for cricket exceeded even Menzies’ own, was as Percy Spender observed, ‘keener-minded’, and a more sought-after companion. But, whatever the loss of these three colleagues had meant personally, it had a vital political dimension for the Prime Minister in the winter of 1940. Gullett’s status in the party and links with the press made him a useful ally, notwithstanding his age and poor health.

28 William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, act 3, sc. 2 (Marc Anthony on Julius Caesar).
Street, an invaluable source of guidance to Menzies about the senior ranks of the military, was popular and effective in Parliament and on the platform. Both of them, with Fairbairn, were key members of a Cabinet that had an unavoidable general election date with the nation in less than three months. Newspapers were already forecasting a September 21 poll.

A heaven-sent opportunity?

No one was more conscious of the impending election than the men who ran and financed the UAP party machine. Within hours of the crash, Telford Simpson of the Consultative Council had written to Menzies with breathtaking indelicacy of a ‘rather heaven sent’ opportunity to launch a new party. There were three ministerial vacancies. If ‘men of better standing’ were willing to come forward to support a ‘Win the War’ party, the Prime Minister ‘could select a better ministry’. Although it was not made public until August 27, Sir Frederick Stewart had offered in June to step down from the Cabinet and vacate his seat in Parliament. Among the men of ‘better standing’ was the former NSW premier Bertram Stevens, whose Canberra ambitions were widely touted. News was published on August 16 that Menzies had sent an urgent telegram asking Stevens to come to Melbourne. Simpson pressed his case three days later, pointing out that the NSW branch of the UAP was in disarray and independent candidates ‘backed up by large financial resources’ threatened to emerge. Menzies did not rise to the bait.

Buying time, Menzies reshuffled the existing ministry, leaving the House of Representatives back-bench unchanged and promoting two UAP senators. His South Australian friend Phil McBride became Army Minister; and the respected 72-year-old West Australian Herbert Collett, a decorated AIF infantry Colonel, was given Gullett’s portfolios. Artie Fadden added Air and Civil Aviation to his existing Ministry of Supply and Development and role as Minister without Portfolio assisting the Treasurer. As the three deceased colleagues all held Victorian seats, it was obvious that if the government were returned at the forthcoming election there would be Victorian additions to the ministry. On August 20 the Prime Minister announced the election date of September 21. The next day’s Sydney Morning Herald and Daily Telegraph rebuked him for missing the chance to form a new patriotic party and reinforce his ministry with ‘big

31 Tink contends (www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4686146.html): ‘Rather than hold three by-elections, Menzies decided to bring the general election forward.’ A September election date was already settled: there was never any prospect that three by-elections would be held.
32 Telford Simpson to Menzies, 13 Aug. 1940, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/40/23.
33 Canberra Times, 28 Aug. 1940.
34 Sydney Morning Herald, 16 Aug. 1940.
men’. The Argus joined the chorus on August 24, regretting in an editorial the missed opportunity of welcoming the Victorian Country Party Premier Albert Dunstan’s willingness to stand for the seat of Flinders. Evidently in a fragile state, Menzies dictated a mournful letter to Hugh McClure Smith, the editor of the Herald. The letter was quoted by Menzies’ biographer Allan Martin from a copy in the Menzies family papers. In eight elections over 12 years ‘every campaign has been abhorrent to me’, the Prime Minister lamented:

I have waded through the sewer of personal abuse, but I have so far emerged. I have never expected that high office would be handed to me on a plate without pains and without trouble, and, quite frankly, I don’t see why anyone else should expect it...It is indeed ironical to think that the Government’s danger of defeat — a defeat which might have tragic results for Australia — does not come from its opponents but from the destructive activities of a relatively small group of men who have failed to realize that if the people are persuaded that this Government is a bad one they will certainly instal [sic] another government which will not be made up of angels of light but of Curtin, Ward, Brennan and Company. That result will not so much be bad for me or my party as ruinous for Australia. I tell you quite honestly that my own defeat would, as such, leave me cheerful. As Prime Minister I have sweated day and night, under recurrent difficulties and disappointments, and sometimes disloyalties. I have gone on in spite of it all, doing my indifferent best, sniped at and loftily admonished by every leading newspaper except the Melbourne Age until I sometimes curse the day I entered politics.

On reading the typed version Menzies thought better of the reference to The Age and deleted it.35 Revealing that he was not himself, he left in an argument that he must have known was not quite true: that it was constitutionally impossible to bring unelected men into the Cabinet — forgetting, it would seem, Section 64 of the Constitution envisaging that ‘no Minister of State shall hold office for a longer period than three months unless he is or becomes a senator or a member of the House of Representatives’. Had he chosen to do so, the Prime Minister could have responded to the call to bring in new men from outside the Parliament in the knowledge that they could stand for election within a month. The point was no secret; it had been made by the press. Nevertheless, Menzies thought better than to throw in his hand with Telford Simpson and his henchman Bert Horsfield of whose joint ‘disloyalties’ earlier in the year he had been warned.

Menzies narrowly survived the ensuing election. He contemplated another appeal to the electorate if he could not conjure a workable majority.36 Choosing to rely on the support of two Independents in the House of Representatives, he brought back into the government Harold Holt from service as a gunner in the AIF, reinstated close ally Eric Harrrison who had twice stood down to make way for Country Party members, and gave the last place to his father-in-law, Senator John Leckie. Though lacking the weight of Fairbairn, Street, and Gullett the three replacements were, it seemed safe to assume, men on whom he could rely. The men on ultimately he could not rely were rebellious UAP backbenchers. A year later, after his return from an extended period in Britain, and a Cabinet re-shuffle, ‘dissension, discontent and personal animosities’ abounded.37 Labor would not join a national government. With his own party support crumbling and the Country Party resurgent, a dispirited Menzies stepped down. He was succeeded by Arthur Fadden. In retrospect he would say that he did not believe his ‘rejection and, as I felt it at the time, my humiliation, would have happened if those three men had lived…’38

‘A hole in the fabric of government’

Many historians have been inclined to agree with Menzies’ political analysis. The Official Historian Paul Hasluck’s judgment cannot be disputed: ‘The loss of any one of these men alone would have weakened the Ministry and Parliament. The loss of the three together tore a hole in the fabric of government.’39 In his book, Air Disaster Canberra, Andrew Tink goes further, arguing that the eventual fall of the coalition government, and the accession of John Curtin and Labor, would not have occurred if Harry Gullett had not died. Gullett’s seat was lost in the 1940 general election to an Independent, Arthur Coles, who eventually voted the government down. However, in the realm of counter-factual thinking many conclusions are possible. The overwhelming facts about Menzies’ ‘humiliation’ were that he had led the UAP to a disastrous election result, and that he had antagonised the press and too many of his own party.40 Even had Fairbairn, Street, and Gullett lived, there is no certainty that they would have supported him wholeheartedly in a divided party room in 1941.41 Moreover, the vote of one

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37 Percy Spender quoted in Hazlehurst, Menzies Observed, p.242.
38 Menzies, Afternoon Light, p.18.
40 For Keith Murdoch’s preference for Labor in 1941 and belief that Menzies’ unpopularity around the country doomed him, see S. Ricketson to Murdoch, 5 Feb. 1943, copy; Ricketson to W. S Robinson, 1 Dec. 1941, copy, for the ‘sniping campaign’ and ‘vendetta’ of The Argus and Sydney Morning Herald, Wright MSS, NLA MS 8119 Series 6/1.
41 There is little evidence to sustain Tink’s notion (e.g. Sydney Morning Herald, 23 May 2013) that Gullett, Street, and Fairbairn constituted a kind of political Praetorian Guard for Menzies.
or two Independents in Parliament would never have been crucial if so many men had not previously lost their seats and so many others deserted him. The carnage when A16-97 plummeted into Cameron’s paddock was truly a dreadful calamity; but it was not ‘the plane crash that destroyed a government’.  

What is undeniable is the intense emotion Menzies exhibited about the deaths of his colleagues. Kenneth Menzies, the Prime Minister’s older son, 18 years old in August 1940, would tell of how his father was devastated. ‘Not only were they his friends, but from the point of view of the war machine, they were the key Cabinet members.’ The testimony of the ABC television producer Geoff Crane provides further insight:

I have chatted with Heather Henderson, Sir Robert’s daughter, on a number of occasions through work. She was eleven at the time of the accident and was at boarding school in Melbourne at the time…She recently told me her mother mentioned that within Sir Robert there was a tangible personal change in him after the crash.

Murray Tyrrell, though very young and junior at the time, was a shrewd political observer with an attentive ear. ‘Half your job was to…feed your minister with whatever information you picked up.’ The secretaries and assistant secretaries and other staff used to play table tennis in the basement of Parliament House. ‘You all talked and said “Hey, have you heard this?” and then I’d go back and tell Dick Elford.’ Tyrrell was friendly with Peter Looker, who was courting the stenographer in Fairbairn’s office, his future wife Jean Withington. Through Looker he was privy to the moods and attitudes of Menzies. ‘I don’t think he was particularly close to those three,’ Tyrrell was to say, ‘I think they were close to him. And that is a different matter.’ What Tyrrell recognised in retrospect, with all the percipience of a Canberran with decades as Official Secretary and counsellor to successive Governors-General, was the political nature of the support that Menzies was receiving. His party leadership had been close fought. The nation was at war. ‘I think they were looking for leadership and Menzies provided it and I think they stuck with him.’ But there could be no certainty about how long the leadership compass would continue to point in the same direction.

Distressed though he was, Menzies had another duty to perform. He must return to Melbourne and lead the mourners at the service in St Paul’s Cathedral. If there were public doubts about the safety of the RAAF’s Hudson aircraft, seeing the Prime Minister flying to Melbourne for the funeral would have been

42 Tink, *Air Disaster*, p. 280. Tink went further in a broadcast on 8 May 2013, saying that, if the crash had not occurred, he had little doubt that Menzies would have won the 1940 election (‘Overnight’ with Trevor Chappell, ABC Local Radio).


44 Tyrrell interview, 7 April 1977.
a good way to dispel them. One of No. 2 Squadron’s most experienced Hudson pilots would be entrusted with the responsibility of captaining such a flight. Ray Garrett recalled that he was that man. At 39 he had flown for 13 years with the CAF and the Larkin Aircraft Company in the Northern Territory before the war. The first civilian flying instructor with the CAF, Garrett was, he said, ‘the only qualified instructor in the Squadron though Ryland did a lot of desk instruction’. This was to depreciate Jack Ryland’s undoubted greater expertise at the time. Still, what Garrett clearly remembered was being detailed to collect Menzies and several colleagues from Canberra.

A flight to Melbourne in an aircraft identical to the one that lay wrecked on Duncan Cameron’s farm, would have given the Prime Minister the time and the ambience in which to reflect on the ‘terrible hour’ that had passed two days earlier. He could see, hear, and feel the world as Harry Gullett, Geoff Street, Brudenell White, Frank Thornthwaite, and Dick Elford did in their last untroubled minutes. And exactly as he must have suspected Jim Fairbairn did. Indeed Garrett remembered, ‘he was in the 2nd pilot’s seat part of the trip’.45 Vivid as the recollection was — and much as I wanted to believe it — Garrett’s memory had betrayed him. He did not fly Menzies that day, or any other day in the next six weeks. The Prime Minister, along with the Governor-General and other ministers and officials travelled to Melbourne on the same train that bore the coffins from Canberra. The first minister reported as taking to the air after the deaths of his colleagues was Sir Frederick Stewart who returned from Melbourne to Sydney on Saturday August 17.46

Did Menzies blame himself for the fate of A16-97 and its crew and passengers on 13 August 1940? It is hard not to wonder whether the enduring sentiment expressed in his memoirs went beyond sadness and regret at the loss of their companionship and political support. His brain was agile enough to rebut insidious doubt. If Jim Fairbairn had behaved rashly surely it was not his fault? What he could certainly do was try to minimise the likelihood of such a calamity befalling so many national leaders in the future. Immediately after the crash there was considerable criticism of the government for allowing so many important men to travel together.47 It was widely believed that Cabinet had decided that in future no more than two ministers should fly together. But this would have been an impossible requirement. In fact, as the Canberra Times and other papers had reported on August 15, it had been agreed that air travel would be limited to the smallest possible parties. A spokesman said that a hard and fast rule could not be laid down but: ‘Members of the Cabinet will continue

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45 Sir Raymond Garrett to CH, 26 April and 2 Nov. 1978.
46 The Argus, 19 Aug. 1940.
47 Sydney Morning Herald, editorial, 14 Aug. 1940.
to use air transport frequently, as their work demands the utmost mobility at times. However, they will not travel more than one or two at a time except when it is unavoidable.’

Two months later, perturbed citizens were drawing attention to the fact that four ministers had flown together to a meeting. About the same time, returning in a commercial airline DC-3 from reporting on electoral campaigning in Tasmania, Dick Elford’s old Argus colleague Harold Cox, then with the Sun, found himself sitting next to the Prime Minister:

As we came into land the motors were suddenly switched on again and we climbed and did a second circuit. I noticed Menzies lying back, apparently quite asleep except that his hand was on the armrest of the seat and I noticed the knuckles white and the fingers tensed and I said ‘Well, we’re doing a second circuit too Prime Minister!’ Menzies looked at me…48

Remembering

If Menzies could not forget the ‘terrible hour’, many others were determined that the nation should remember. Arthur Fadden endorsed a suggestion that an aerodrome in Victoria be named after Jim Fairbairn. John Curtin had proposed within months of the tragedy that the design of Canberra should incorporate a memorial garden where simple stone obelisks mounted with plaques would commemorate the nation’s great men — there the three ministerial victims would find a place amid explorers, educationists, road and railway builders, trade union pioneers. Although Curtin compared his idea with Westminster Abbey and Washington’s Arlington National Cemetery there was no mention of either famous generals or other servicemen who might have shared their fate.49 The Labor leader’s idea was not taken up.

At the time of the coronial inquiry the site of the crash had been marked by the surveyor of the Department of the Interior, L. C. A. Hope, with a cement peg. Later, Cameron’s paddock had become part of the field-firing and manoeuvre area of the Royal Military College, Duntroon.50 Relatives of Sir Brudenell White eventually suggested to Senator Annabelle Rankin that a memorial might be erected. Senator Rankin visited the site of the crash with Jo Gullett M.P., accompanied by departmental officers. If other relatives concerned approved the idea, it was reported in March 1952, then the Minister for the Interior, W. S. Kent Hughes, an old comrade of Fairbairn and Street from their Young

50 Rural block 602 DP 554.
Nationalist days, would submit the proposal to the National Memorials Committee. Provision would also be made for a plaque at Fairbairn aerodrome hangars.

The National Memorials Committee was suspended in 1952 because of the workload of its chairman, the Prime Minister. It did not meet again for 23 years. The National Capital Planning and Development Committee was alerted informally to the proposal and recorded the opinion that ‘psychologically it would be inappropriate to erect a cairn at the site of the crash, or any plaque at the airport relating to the crash other than possible naming of the airport as Fairbairn’. The committee felt that ‘the memory of Sir Brudenall [sic] White might be recorded at the Australian War Memorial; and the parliamentarians concerned by an appropriate tablet at Parliament House’. The other six victims were not considered. In the event, Brudenell White was commemorated by his family with a plaque and Shrine of Remembrance in St John’s Church, Reid. The Wiesener family would have Dick honoured along with four other members of the congregation in a pair of stained-glass windows at the Homebush-Strathfield Congregational Church.

On official recognition of all 10 men, wiser heads prevailed. Agreement having been secured from the next-of-kin, a ‘simple memorial cairn’ was approved. In late 1955 the Department of Works submitted a sketch plan and drawing of a rectangular cairn in local stone with a metal plaque. The concept was priced at £250 in April 1958. The plan did not proceed. As the Australian Heritage Database enigmatically states, between April and August 1958 ‘a change in proposal occurred’. On 7 August 1958, a two-metre-wide granite monolith was removed from the site of the Ainslie Rex Hotel to the site of the disaster. Supported by two smaller stones, and embedded in concrete, it became what is known as the Air Disaster Memorial. The plaque named the 10 men who ‘while serving their country lost their lives on this spot’. The cairn was dedicated by the Prime Minister at a private ceremony on 12 August 1960. Doubts were subsequently expressed about whether the ‘spot’ in Kowen Forest, Fairbairn Pine Plantation, off

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51 National Memorials Committee Agenda; meeting, April 1975, Archives ACT.
52 Built in 1884, the Homebush-Strathfield Congregational Church, corner Albert Road and Homebush Road Strathfield, is now the Sydney Korean Parish.
53 The Minister for the Interior and Works, Allen Fairhall, announced in Sept. 1958 that the cairn had been erected. Menzies, hearing of it on the radio, expressed his astonishment that he had been ‘disregarded in a very offensive fashion’. No relatives were informed and no ceremony was held. The PM’s private secretary told Fairhall: ‘Mr Menzies does not consider it necessary that an official unveiling ceremony should now be held.’ Eighteen months later H. J. Manning of the Dept of the Interior, who had written an article about the crash, suggested to the Prime Minister that a ceremony of remembrance be held at the site on the twentieth anniversary of the disaster. Menzies now agreed. Families were given nine days’ notice in a letter that avoided actually inviting them: ‘PM wants all notified of the event & told they would be welcome if they could come.’ Bob Hitchcock learned by telegram on Aug. 11 and drove to Canberra overnight on the twelfth. Charlie Crosdale’s widow was too ill to attend and her son, unemployed like her, could not afford the trip. Jack Palmer’s widow chose not to go. According to the official file neither she nor her brother Laurie could be located (NAA: A463, 1960/3940).
Pialligo Avenue, Oaks Estate, was correctly located. Half a century later several versions of the plaque had been stolen or vandalised. The site of the memorial was off-limits because of its proximity to a military rifle range. The current plaque was in storage. Early in 2013, yet another replacement plaque bore witness to community indifference and repeated acts of vandalism.\(^5^4\)

While the public memorial of an accident never adequately explained was damaged and eventually rendered inaccessible, almost all of the sources from which the official story of the accident could be told remained secure. The records of the Service Court of Inquiry, the Air Force Court of Inquiry, and other secret files, lay quietly undisturbed in the Australian Archives until 16 years later a curious historian and a succession of pertinacious research assistants began to prise them open.

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\(^5^4\) Australian Heritage Database, Place ID, 18801, Place File No. 8/01/000/0419. I am grateful to Mark Dawson and Elizabeth Estberg for information and references about the cairn: Department of the Interior file PC 40/11/0 NAA: A3032, ACT Archives. In 1996, Selma McLaren noted in a Heritage Study Proposal that the isolated and neglected site was in an area where 4WD vehicles raced on forest trails; it had been attacked by vandals; random fires had occurred and cult ceremonies and rituals held nearby; there had been assaults and allegedly a murder in the vicinity (File courtesy of John Myrtle). Tink (\textit{Air Disaster}, opp. p.103) for a photograph of the ’pitted and dented’ plaque. On 13 Aug. 2013 Andrew Tink and Estelle Blackburn brought together family members of the victims for a ceremony to mark enhancements to the memorial and its environs (\textit{Canberra Times}, 14 Aug. 2013).