27. Aftermath

‘Both the Prime Minister and Mrs Menzies were deeply shocked by the tragedy,’ the Sydney Morning Herald reported on 14 August 1940. ‘They were friendly with all the passengers in the plane and their families and Mr Menzies could not conceal his grief.’ Haunting as the crash may have proved for Robert Menzies, its impact on him could not compare with the searing sorrow of those who, without warning, lost husbands, fathers, brothers, and children. It was not until October 10 that the newspapers reported Justice Lowe’s findings. The news was no longer on the front pages but the healing of time had barely begun. For some of the widows, grief would soften into enduring sadness. To others, bitterness would cling, fuelled by resentment at the perceived injustices that followed.

Audrey Elford, aware of Peggy Fairbairn’s flirtation with her husband, nevertheless sent a letter of sympathy and flowers to the widow of the Air Minister. There was no reciprocal gesture, not even a reply. The slight, for thus it was interpreted, rankled for decades. As Dick Elford had risen in the last year of his life as a young man of promise, and the boys had begun to go to school, Audrey too had emerged from the domestic shadows. On 13 August 1940 she had been invited to a lunch party with Evelyn Casey, Dick Casey’s widowed mother. At an adjoining table she heard someone talking about a crash in Canberra that morning. She was assured that her husband had not been involved but she knew otherwise. In a faint, she was taken upstairs to Mrs Casey’s room. Two hours later, Sir Earle Page’s daughter and her husband Bill Tart from the RAAF public relations office arrived to convey the news that Dick was among the victims.

To Audrey’s shock was added the realisation of how much she had relied on Dick’s official private secretary’s salary of £508 a year and a supplementary allowance of £36 as liaison officer between the Minister and the Departments of Air and Civil Aviation. As the widow of a ministerial staff member, Audrey had no entitlement to a Service pension. ‘I still get furious,’ she admitted, ‘when I hear rumours that the Government gave me £80 000.’ She recalled receiving £350 in Commonwealth Employees’ compensation and £250 in securities initially yielding 2¼ per cent for each of her boys.¹ Her solicitor, Geoffrey Cohen, did his best on her behalf. But they encountered Menzies at his most insensitive. Invited to talk to the Prime Minister at his Victoria Barracks office, Audrey was reminded that she was a civilian widow with no claim on the government.

¹ In fact, £200 for each of the boys was placed in trust, administered by a departmental official, until 3¼ per cent Treasury bonds were passed over in full and final settlement in 1954. Treasury rejected a proposal that the total amount of compensation be supplemented by Audrey and a sum of £1000 be invested in higher-earning securities recommended by Ian Potter (NAA: 705, 300/1/9).
The Treasurer Arthur Fadden had advised against granting a pension as recommended by the Department of Air: ‘dependants of other victims of the same disaster are probably not so well provided for as Mrs Elford’. Ironically, Fadden as Minister for Air had previously proposed a widow’s pension of £117 a year plus 5/- per week per child, only to meet the classic objection to ‘establishing a new principle’ from the then Treasurer Percy Spender.

Audrey Elford was spared the humiliating bureaucratic calculations of her total assets of approximately £3000, including the proceeds of insurance policies valued at £1600 after probate duties and expenses, Dick’s bank deposit funds of £46, and her own ‘private means’ (£700 in Commonwealth bonds, £20 in Argus shares and an average of £1 a week in trust income). But she would never forget the long cigar on which Menzies drew while telling her he could not create a precedent of granting a pension to a non-Service widow: she was young and could go out to work to support her two sons and send them to a good state school. Thirty-seven years later she was to recall with shame that she blurted in response: ‘my children were not born to go to a state school’.

What made the apparent indifference of Menzies so hurtful was that the government subsequently decided that dependants of Commonwealth officers killed while travelling by air on official duty should receive a £1000 insurance payment. But the decision was not to apply retrospectively. With the pain of loss and grievance intermingled, Audrey would carry long afterwards the belief that Menzies had even objected to the erection of a memorial to the crash victims.2

Possibly prompted by the Prime Minister, the Air Department offered Audrey a job eight weeks after Dick’s death. It was too soon. Her family was in turmoil. Six days after the Canberra crash, her 30-year-old brother Geoff, a clerk, who had enlisted in June 1940, was discharged as a gunner. The support he might have given was short-lived as he re-enlisted at the beginning of October. Less than a fortnight after his brother-in-law’s death, another potential family supporter, Audrey’s younger brother, Maxwell (known as Bill), a poultry farmer and orchardist, had enlisted in the Army. Dick’s sister, Barbara Elford, who had married a Corowa farmer, Roy Pearce, in 1937, lived far away.3 Audrey’s mother, Alice, would in time move to Melbourne and live in an adjoining apartment to her daughter and grandchildren.

2 NAA: M2606, 23 for ‘bias against the P.M.’ in 1961 for not having done more for her; undated press cutting (ca 1992), Elford MSS.
3 Max Basham served in the ranks till the end of the war, when he was discharged as a trooper in the 9th Division Cavalry. After the war he worked for a while with the Olympic Tyre company before moving to Perth. Geoffrey Basham ended the war as a captain in the Infantry Corps after serving as a liaison officer at General MacArthur’s headquarters. After the war he would own and operate a soft drink factory, become a hotel licensee, and eventually senior partner in a jam and pickle business. For the Basham brothers’ war service see, http://www.ww2roll.gov.au. Barbara Pearce had three children, owned and managed rural properties with her husband whom she outlived by several decades, and died aged 98 in 2006.
Crushed by anxiety, Audrey had lost heart, finally giving up her Air Force job after fainting into a waste paper basket. She tried again, this time in postal censorship, but it was not a happy situation. Unwell, and in reduced circumstances, having moved into a two-room flat, Audrey had approached the new Labor government for assistance. The War Cabinet, on the recommendation of the Advisory War Council, approved an ex gratia payment of £250. A month later the War Cabinet revisited the matter and doubled the additional payment. It might have been more. But Archie Elford, scrupulous to the last, had included in a statement of his daughter-in-law’s income and assets the £4 a week he had been giving her as well as her one-tenth share of the trustee sale of a recently deceased aunt’s property in South Australia.

A year later, determined to be independent, Audrey worked briefly with the American Red Cross arranging accommodation for Marines on leave. The weekly subvention from Archie Elford was discontinued after four years, his own retirement income — he would die aged 94 in 1972 — not keeping pace with inflation. In 1944 she married a divorced Canadian-born airman, Bill Belfield. In poor health, her private life was troubled. The marriage ended three years later, after which she reverted to her previous married name. After the war Audrey worked in a real estate office for two years, then moved to the Royal Children’s Hospital Auxiliary as Organising Secretary. Later, she worked for Don Chipp organising billets for the 1956 Olympic Games. She bought, refurbished, and sold old houses; and for a while ran a guest house. Her resolve to maintain her social position was strikingly visible in a white carpet, defiantly resisting the trampling of her boys and their friends, and a marvel to relatives visiting the home. The twins were her pride. If she could not have the life that she had hoped to share with Dick, she would do all she could for the young men who were his legacy to her. Particularly galling therefore were unsubstantiated stories in later years that Peggy Fairbairn had paid for the education of Dick Elford’s sons at Geelong Grammar.

In accordance with compensation regulations in force for the RAAF since 1930, Olive Hitchcock was awarded £750, of which £50 was to be held in trust for her son until he was 21. Under the Superannuation Act, as the widow of a Permanent Air Force officer she was entitled to a pension per annum of £169 plus £13 for a child. It was not until October 1946 that it occurred to anyone in authority that an amendment to the Repatriation Act in December 1941 ‘would

4 NAA: A2676, 2172.
5 Married in 1944 to William Ewart Belfield, a Winnipeg-born, London-educated, pre-war building contractor, Audrey Elford resumed her former married name by deed poll after her divorce three years later. Belfield, then a flight rigger, had been seriously injured late in 1941 when caught in a roller moving a Fairey Battle crate at Point Cook (NAA: A705, 15 163/91/148; MT 522/1; A9301, 13041).
6 Audrey Elford, interview, 27 June 1977; Audrey Elford to CH, 30 June 1977, 11 Nov. 1978; NAA: A2676, 2172. For Audrey Elford’s final years see the memoirs of her daughter-in-law: Jennifer Laycock Elford, the snow girl story: A Story about Survival and Revival, Wodonga, 2011.
entitle the widow to consideration for War Pension’. A pension of £5.9.0 a fortnight was duly granted with an additional £1.15.0 a fortnight for her ‘first child’, backdated to the end of June 1945. Money had not been uppermost in Olive’s mind. Knowing that the inscribed American Conklin pen-and-pencil set Bob had been carrying in his pocket, her precious gift to him, had not been found, she had hoped for ‘just some little things belonging to my husband or some part of the plane, to forward to the Perth Museum to be placed alongside his father’s’. For a few weeks after the crash she had moved to Glen Iris, five minutes’ walk from Sheila Palmer, on whose behalf she wrote in November to the Prime Minister enquiring about the rosary beads Jack Palmer had with him when he died. Palmer’s blue mittens, balaclava, and two scarves had already been returned along with sundry kit and uniform items.

Olive was inconsolable for months. It was not just being forgotten by inert and indifferent bureaucrats. Or even, four months after Bob’s death, having to ask for the government’s assurance that his funeral expenses would be met before the bank would allow her to operate her husband’s savings account. The enduring trauma was the way in which she learned of her beloved Bob’s death. The Prime Minister’s office had let it be known that a ban had been imposed on the publication and broadcasting of the news until the relatives of the victims had been informed.

Mrs Menzies...played an important part in arrangements to break the news as gently as possible to relatives of the dead men, all of whom were married. She telephoned from the Lodge at Canberra to friends and acquaintances in Melbourne who were also acquainted with the families of many of the men in the plane, and they were thus spared the shock of receiving the news as a bald announcement.

Not everyone was spared. According to several newspapers on August 14, Bob’s mother, uninformed, had a presentiment of the tragedy. She was assisting at an RAAF camp-comforts canteen in Perth, it was said, and became so disturbed at ‘an entertainment’ that she left before the show ended. No newspaper reported what Bob Hitchcock’s friend Rex Taylor heard. On the morning of August 13 Olive had an appointment at the hairdresser’s.

Immediately following the accident, broad details were announced over the national, and some commercial, radio stations and the names of the passengers along with those of the aircrew were read out...at

7 NAA: A705, 300/1/9; A705, 166/17/1565; A705, 42/2/180.
8 NAA; A461, 700/1/392.
9 The Examiner, 14 Aug. 1940.
10 The West Australian, Barrier Miner, 14 Aug. 1940.
that precise moment Olive was sitting in the Salon and heard the radio reference to her husband’s name. It was a shocking experience for her, and one which would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Resolved to devote herself to the careful nurturing of her child Robert Jr, over the next decade and more she raised him into ‘a fine youth and caring son’. Her nieces remembered her as a gifted dressmaker who made ‘exquisite gowns, beaded and embroidered…the house was always full of rolls and rolls of materials, beads, furs, embroidery’. Young Robert became an enthusiastic member of the Air Training Corps. He was, as Rex Taylor saw, ‘a source of great, but brief pleasure’ in his mother’s otherwise sad and grieving life. A daughter, Kaye, who became close to Bob, as he too came to be known, was the legacy of a casual encounter after the war ended. Anonymous phone calls and letters suggesting that her husband had been a fifth columnist who premeditated the crash had tormented Olive. As the years passed, distressing rumour and innuendo, defamatory of Bob’s character and Service reputation, was never entirely extinguished. Olive’s mother died in 1956. Wilfred Beecroft, who had sold his farm and moved with his wife to St Kilda to live with his daughter and grandchildren, died of cancer two years later. Olive moved to Springvale and nursed her father there through his final illness. Increasingly reclusive and paranoid, believing at times that she was being followed, she fell into recurring bouts of deep depression that was unrelieved by multiple electro-convulsive therapy sessions. Returning home one afternoon in July 1959, Robert discovered the body of his 47-year-old mother alone in the house. His 13-year-old half-sister Kaye had earlier found the doors and windows locked and was told to walk to an aunt’s house several miles away. After numerous failed attempts, Olive had at last succeeded in escaping the misery that had engulfed her.11

For Robert’s uncles, Les and Harry Hitchcock, there would be frequent reminders in the years ahead of the older brother they had lost. They had both, as they were promised, followed him into the Air Force. Harry entered as an aircraft mechanic, and in August 1940 was at Flemington as a sergeant instructor on air frames. He was commissioned as a technical officer in November 1943 and became the engineer officer of the Elementary Flying School at Benalla. Later he came under the wing of Rex Taylor, becoming his assistant engineer at No. 2 Training Group, Wagga. After the war, promoted to Wing Commander, he was head of RAAF motor transport engineering. For some years Harry assumed responsibility for his orphaned nephew’s welfare. After the war, Les returned to work with West Australian Newspapers where he had been apprenticed as a

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compositor. He had been boarding an RAAF tender to catch the train at Perth en route for Point Cook when news of the Canberra crash came through the Pearce station communications centre. Bob Hitchcock’s protégé Len Bacon, by then a flying officer, organised the cancellation of the travel orders so that Les could remain to comfort his mother. As early as 1943 when he joined No. 13 Squadron in Canberra preparing for duty in New Guinea and Borneo, a fellow senior NCO had shown him the then secret Air Court of Inquiry file.

In his later years Les proved a proud custodian of his older brother’s memory. Their father had been 37 years and six months old when he perished in the Tanami. Their mother died 23 years later, aged just 62. Separated in life they were at last reunited. In 1929 Violet had arranged that she would be interred with her husband. Henry Smith Hitchcock’s granite and marble headstone bears the additional inscription: ‘Also his wife Violet Elizabeth born 21-3-1890 died 5-6-1952.’

The government ban on releasing news of the crash until the relatives were informed was well meant. But some families had proved harder to reach than those of the more distinguished passengers. Like Audrey Elford, Joan Wiesener — not one of the Prime Minister’s circle — would learn of her husband’s death in traumatic circumstances. Her daughter-in-law Diney Wiesener heard the story many years later from Joan’s mother, Gertrude Beale:

> Joan Wiesener was at the dentist in Macquarie Street when the dentist received a telephone call from her home telling him what had happened. The dentist then told Joan that her family had called and that she had to go straight home. She was about 6 months pregnant with Richard but he sent her off by herself. In the street she saw the newspaper billboards for the latest editions, announcing the accident and she knew what had happened.

Seventy years later, the family remained baffled and outraged. ‘How she ever managed to get home, I will never know,’ Diney Wiesener said. ‘Why could that dentist not have called a taxi, and when it arrived, not seen her into it himself?’ Joan’s third child, born four months after her husband’s death, was given his father’s names, Richard Frederick. (His older brother’s forenames were reversed and he became Antony Richard, known as ‘Tony’.) Her husband’s friend Ray Purves, later to rise to the commanding heights of the economy as Sir Raymond Purves CBE, chairman of Clyde Industries, became the guardian of her three young children. A congenital deformity of the feet had thwarted Purves’ earnest effort in 1939 to enlist with Dick in the Air Force. He was to become a brilliant entrepreneurial financial adviser and mentor to members of the Wiesener family, many of whom became shareholders in Clyde Engineering.

12 Diney Wiesener to CH, 1 Jan. 2010.
As a widow of a war appointee with dependent children, Joan was entitled to a pension of around three pounds a week. Like Dick’s previous emoluments of £427 a year, the Service pension was not critical to her wellbeing. Her father Ronald had sold his interest in the Beale family company. Her parents now lived close by and ensured that she lacked for nothing. The children had a nurse. When the boys were old enough, they went as boarders to the King’s School, Parramatta, their entry facilitated by the pastoralist Eric Hill. Richard left school at 16, learned accountancy, and completed his education at Columbia University before going on to a spectacularly successful and controversial career in business finance. While still a teenager he had met and would soon marry Diana (‘Diney’) Hipsley, daughter of his father’s contemporary at Shore, Richard Burton Hipsley.

Margot Abbey Wiesener went to Frensham in Mittagong. She would grace the social pages while hinting at her career with a charm bracelet in the form of a tiny gold typewriter with a seed pearl-studded keyboard.13 In 1962, aged 24 and immediately after his headline-making divorce, she married the journalist Charles Buttrose, then an Australian Broadcasting Commission executive. Buttrose, whose secretary she had been, was 30 years her senior and father of four, including the precocious journalist Ita, and Will who was to become a notable banker.14 Joan’s brother-in-law Brian Wiesener, just 15 when his brother died, completed his Leaving Certificate at Sydney Church of England Grammar School in 1942, and signed on to the Air Training Corps as a cadet two and a half years after the accident. Studying accountancy at the Metropolitan Business College, he worked as a junior audit clerk until on 14 August 1943, two years and a day after his brother perished, he enlisted in the RAAF as an AC1. In due course he became a sergeant pilot and served in New Guinea and in training units until demobilised and discharged in November 1945. After the war, he worked with Ray Purves before becoming a stockbroker with Ord Minnett.15

A total of 47 exhibits had been used to assist in identifying the victims of the accident for the Coroner. Not one of the personal items recovered from the crash site belonged to Dick Wiesener. Thus, when it came to convincing the NSW Probate Registrar that her husband was in fact dead, Joan Wiesener’s solicitors had a problem. They had noted newspaper reports that the bodies were unrecognisable. Fortunately, the Coroner’s finding and a photostat of the record of the identification of Wiesener by Group Captain Wilson sufficed. Perhaps they might have added conclusively a copy of the condolence message from the King. In any event, no one in the Registrar’s office was in a position to question the basis, flawed as it almost certainly was, of ‘Del’ Wilson’s determination.

13 Australian Women’s Weekly, 26 October 1960.
A few months later Inez Thornthwaite, her husband’s sole executrix, encountered the same problem with the NSW Probate authorities. Her incredulous solicitor explained to the Canberra Coroner:

The Registrar has refused to grant the probate until we can give evidence that her late husband was actually in the plane. We have pointed out that Colonel Thornthwaite’s death was practically a matter of public knowledge, and have produced to him an official certificate of his death, but this will not satisfy him. He wants some evidence that Colonel Thornthwaite actually entered the plane at the time of the accident.16

Eventually common sense prevailed.

Inez Thornthwaite, who had turned 44 on the day the Lowe Inquiry began, was a woman of conviction and independent spirit. She was not going to be enfeebled by adversity. Her husband’s headstone at Lismore cemetery would bear the blithesome inscription ‘The luck of the game’. After receiving two fortnightly pension payments of £4.9.0 she had promptly advised departmental officials that she had no wish to apply for a pension. She had substantial assets and no children to support. Her mother died six weeks after Frank Thornthwaite’s fatal crash. Her parents-in-law as well as her own parents were dead, as were her husband’s sister and two brothers. Liberated from family responsibilities, she continued her active role in the local Red Cross Society, the Country Women’s Association, and Australian Comforts Fund. Scarcely a charity appeal went unheeded.17 Calamities like the bushfires in January 1944 that destroyed six of her station employees’ cottages were surmounted with equanimity and an open swipe at a Premier’s unfounded boast of ‘gratifying’ progress in rehabilitating burnt out areas.18 As the war went on she did not hide her opinions about the proper relations between government and people:

I am getting very tired of our present Government ‘asking’ various sections of the community to do certain things. The wharf labourers were ‘asked’ to return to work. The coalminers are frequently ‘asked’ to resume production. We are fighting 2 nations who do not ‘ask’ their populations to do certain things for the good of their country. Nothing will bring home our very serious position to some members of this community but strong action and enforcement of regulations which will ensure equal sacrifice by all to the war effort.19

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16 Correspondence Feb., March, and May 1941 re proof of death, NAA: A6079/T1 and A432, 1940/764.
18 The Argus, 31 May 1944.
19 The Argus, 6 May 1943. She was rebuked the next day by another correspondent for what ‘seems quite the wrong attitude to any democratic-minded person’.
After the war, Inez spent 18 months in Britain, returning ‘filled with admiration at the efficiency of all public services…but, above all, at the quiet determination with which the whole nation has gone to work, in spite of the maze of forms, regulations, and controls, to get the country back on to its feet’.\textsuperscript{20} In 1947, the Closer Settlement Board resumed ‘Larra’ and the homestead block of 1375 acres was sold.\textsuperscript{21} Having moved to Ocean Grove, and taken a flat in Alcaston House in 1950, Inez lived on until 1992, an intermittent but memorable presence in the lives of her cousins and their children to whom she was known as ‘Dook’, after a comic-book character whose straight-legged walk reminded them of hers. Living with a companion helper, and never afflicted by financial concerns, she inspired a bemused affection. As one of her contemporaries said in earshot of an awed member of the next generation: ‘I don’t suppose she has ever had to turn down her own bed.’

Once the Director of Staff Duties had confirmed for the Director of Personal Services that both Colonel Thornthwaite and General White were on duty when they were killed, the Army could determine its liability to pay compensation. Brudenell White had been appointed to his position directly by the Cabinet, with a salary inclusive of allowances other than travelling allowances of £2000 a year. The Army had no formal record of the appointment but, as a Citizen Force officer called back for full-time duty, it was eventually determined that he was a ‘Member of the Forces’ covered by Section 45 AT of the Australian Soldiers’ Repatriation Act of 1940. His widow and 19-year-old student daughter, Rosemary, were dependants. Lady White was entitled to a share of the pension her husband was receiving before he was recalled to duty. A war pension of £6 a fortnight was approved to be paid in quarterly instalments.\textsuperscript{22}

Proud of their husband and father, close to him as they had been, the Whites were devastated. Almost half a century later, his daughter Rosemary Derham would write:

\begin{quote}
The horror of his death haunted us, although we did not say so. He felt pain so much and to have been burned to death is unspeakable. Of course they told us that the impact killed them all and we pray that is what happened but we can never know.

For me, his anguish lives on.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{The Argus}, 6 Nov. 1948. \\
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Historic Homesteads of Australia}, vol. two, Australian Council of National Trusts, Cassell, North Melbourne, 1976, p.267. \\
\textsuperscript{22} ‘War Pension benefit for families of Late General Sir C. B. B. White and Late Col. F Thornthwaite’, NAA; MP508, 66/701/27. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Derham, \textit{The Silence Ruse}, p. 269.
\end{flushright}
The anguish for some had a tincture of guilt as well as sorrow. For young Geoffrey Fairbairn at Geelong Grammar, taken under the wing of the 26-year-old history master Manning Clark, there was no hiding the distress and confusion. With so much to live up to, his mother confided to the headmaster Dr Darling, it would be difficult for her son. She confessed that there was nothing she could say or do that was any help. Manning Clark had arrived in Melbourne to take up his teaching appointment three days before the Canberra tragedy. When he looked around his class a month later he noticed ‘one face with pleading eyes…It was the look of a boy telling anyone with eyes to see: don’t tell me there is any answer to my pain.’ ‘I remember,’ Clark wrote in an obituary, ‘showing him in 1941 at a time when the wound from his father’s death still hurt — it was to hurt him all his life — the remark by Ivan in The Brothers Karamazov: “I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for.”’  

Canberra aerodrome, named ‘Fairbairn’ in February 1941, would be a reminder to the end of Geoffrey Fairbairn’s days of 10 horrible deaths and the possibility that his father was somehow to blame for them. The erection of the two-metre-high memorial cairn at the crash site and the memorial service there in August 1960 would accentuate, not assuage, the doubts. So, too, the renaming in 1962 of Headquarters RAAF Canberra as Headquarters RAAF Fairbairn. Even three decades after the crash it was evident that, in the language of the day, he had not found closure. For Geoffrey, and even more for his sister, Angela, who had been especially devoted to her father, young adulthood and later life were also to be indelibly marked by the absence of their mother.

Peggy Fairbairn had been bequeathed an annuity of two-thirds of the net annual income of her husband’s trust fund (valued at over £78 800 in Victoria as well as assets in Queensland and New South Wales). Understandably, she found her life ‘quite empty’ without Jim. She was an inveterate socialite, not made for reclusive widowhood.25 The family property came under the stewardship of her brother-in-law, Osborne. Knowing that her annuity would be halved if she were to wed again, in 1952 she married a British naval officer Commander Kenneth Kemble, ‘an English charmer’ as a niece remembered, and moved to England.26 There she slipped into an accent so foreign to Australian ears that her daughter was to say she would need a course at the Berlitz School of Languages to understand her. Infrequent as her visits were to be (Angela’s daughter, Mary, was to see her gregarious grandmother only three times), the family could rely on her for lively companionship on the occasions when she did re-join them.

To those of different temperament, wealth, and status there was conventional consolation, aid to tide them over, but limited prospects. Like Olive Hitchcock, Audrey Elford, and Joan Wiesener, Sheila Palmer was to be told of her husband’s death hours after thousands already knew. As her son John Foley learned:

Sheila was unaware of the Canberra air disaster in the morning though there were Herald posters announcing it in the city as she went outside for a sandwich for lunch. Fortunately she ran into her brother Frank who took her to a café where they were able to sit down as he told her.

Sheila Palmer’s sorrow, compounded by a dispute over the funeral service, was profound. Unusually for Catholic couples, after 15 months of marriage she and Jack had not been blessed with a child. During his service Jack, like all airmen members of the Permanent Air Force, had contributed to a compulsory superannuation fund at rates determined by his age and salary. An AC1 fitter

would pay around 11 shillings a fortnight. With no children, Sheila Palmer could expect to receive a pension of £65 a year for the rest of her life. There would be a compensation payment of £750. It was little enough but she would have the support of her large family, and from 1942 she would be eligible for the new Commonwealth government’s widow’s pension as well.

Sheila Palmer, the widow, tall among her sisters, nieces, and ‘Grandma Curtain’
(Courtesy of Pat Snowball)

In 1944 she remarried. Her husband, Denis Foley, had emigrated from a small family farm in County Cork in 1935 after a falling out with his father and oldest brother. In his mid-twenties, with some experience of horse training, he found mostly labouring work where he could in outback Queensland and Western Australia and latterly in Johnny Connell’s hotel on the corner of Flinders Lane and Elizabeth Street. Foley sang in the choir at St Mary’s, East St Kilda; devoted to both Catholic faith and culture, he met Sheila not at church but at the races.

After the war Denis Foley and his wife, like four of Sheila’s brothers, were put into a pub as managers by the patriarch of their generation, Cyril Curtain. Prosperous from his expanding legal practice, Cyril had become a hotel broker and eventually owner of a string of suburban and country public houses. The Curtain brothers would remain a sustaining force in their sister’s life. Sheila’s son, John, born late in 1944, looked up to them as role models. Jack Palmer’s mother also remained close to Sheila. ‘I well remember my mother taking
me to meet Jack Palmer’s mother when my father was at work’, John Foley recalled, ‘Mrs Palmer was a kindly gentle woman and she and my mother got on extremely well.’ As the years went by, it was evident that Sheila’s first great love was proving a disturbing presence to her second husband. ‘My mother had many photographs of her time with Jack,’ her son remembered, and ‘many plans for the memorial which she approved. However this was a source of some friction with my father and these records have been lost.’ Sheila Foley, a lifelong smoker, died of lung cancer aged 62 in 1974.27

Rita Crosdale was receiving £4.4.0. a fortnight at the time of her husband’s death. As the authorities quickly noted, the payments would continue until ‘the pension conditions are settled’. She could expect a pension of £109.4.0 a year to be supplemented by an additional pound a fortnight for her newborn son until he reached the age of 16. As Charlie’s was a war appointment, no compensation was payable.28 But her special situation called forth special assistance. Monsignor Ken Morrison, then Laverton’s Catholic chaplain, recalled the hours and days that followed the accident: ‘A.C.I Crosdale’s wife was in the Queen Victoria Hospital Melbourne, expecting a child when the crash occurred. I was sent off immediately to see about informing her. I discussed the matter with a woman doctor…and questioned whether it was wise to tell her.’

Believing that it was agreed that Rita Crosdale be shielded, the priest entrusted the hospital with keeping reporters and newspapers away. On his return to break the news the next day, he ‘found other counsels had prevailed and she had been informed’.

Father Morrison, who had never met Charlie Crosdale, joined with Mary Daly of the Catholic Welfare Association in seeing to his widow’s needs. Mrs Daly provided a christening robe for the baby. After the baptism in Footscray she and Father Morrison saw Rita off by train to Newcastle. The men at Laverton had a ‘whip round’ on the next pay day and several hundred pounds was entrusted to Morrison. The men knew that two years earlier the RAAF Airmen’s Benevolent Fund — a voluntary contribution scheme managed by the airmen themselves — had ceased paying cash grants to cover hardship while compensation and superannuation payments were being processed. The fund had run out of money, partly as a result of the series of accidents in 1938 that had so perturbed Sir Edward Ellington. The Defence Minister had approved instead a scheme that paid approximately the airman’s rate of fortnightly pay up to a total of £50. The amount was to be treated as an advance against whatever compensation — not more than three years’ pay at the time of death — was eventually received.29 It

27 John Foley, biographical notes on Sheila Curtain, 23 July 2009, and Denis Foley [2009].
28 NAA: A705, 300/1/9.
was helpful but not nearly enough. Morrison established a trust account with the money raised by Crosdale’s workmates and assigned the administration to a local priest in Cessnock.\footnote{Msgnr K. Morrison to CH, 14 Oct. 1982.}

Two other Crosdale boys who were old enough to serve, Francis and Fred, joined the Army and went to Egypt and New Guinea. Doug ‘Tiger’ Crosdale, who had wanted Charlie to send him aeroplane photographs to show his Air League friends, became a career soldier, serving in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, mostly as an instructor, before retiring as a captain. Twelve years after her husband’s death, Charlie Crosdale’s widow married a local builder, James Marshall, with whom she was to have two children. Rita’s second husband predeceased her and she married a third time. The family’s tribulations had not ended with Charlie’s death. Rita would write to the Prime Minister in 1960: ‘I have had three nervous breakdowns in four years. I have never been the same since I received the shock from my late husband’s death.’\footnote{R. Marshall to Prime Minister, [8?] Aug. 1960, NAA: A463, 1960/3940.} Her son, Gary, born on the day his father was killed, was stricken with multiple sclerosis. Charlie’s youngest brother Barry died, aged 35, leaving two children and a pregnant wife. A fireman, Barry had part-time work on his day off removing rubbish from local factories. One day, he had emptied his load but the back lid of the truck would not close. A piece of cardboard was jamming it. He pulled it away and the lid guillotined him. Tragedy followed tragedy. Another brother was burned to death in a house fire at the age of 40. He had been alone. His wife was a nurse working the night shift; his children were staying with relatives. Sidney, the oldest brother, who had served as a mechanic with the Air Force in New Guinea, died of liver cancer at 58. In the annals of family misfortune, the Crosdales were perhaps the most sorely afflicted of those who lost a loved one in August 1940.

Gyp Street had been determined from the beginning of the war to once again ‘do her bit’. She had gone down to Lismore, she said to an interviewer, to buy a sheep dog and learn to milk:

I am a countrywoman and the countrywoman’s place is on her property…If she is able to assist in men’s work she had much better stay there. I have kept station books and helped in boundary riding and sheep mustering. Most of these things I have done for fun. Now I will do them in earnest…Some may even learn to drive tractors, and a few may even be capable of driving teams should the necessity arise.

As it turned out, it was her daughter, Tim, who mastered milking as well as joining her mother for hours in the saddle and exhausting days in the yards.\footnote{Woman, 24 June 1940.} At home with Tim, who had turned 11 just two days earlier, Gyp was prostrate
on learning of her husband’s death. Her son Tony, called to the headmaster’s office at Melbourne Grammar to be given the news by the chaplain, was taken back to Lara by Gwenda Manifold to be with his mother. The family did not attend the service in St Paul’s. Unusually for a man so well organised, Geoff Street had not made a will and it was necessary for his widow to seek letters of administration, a process that ran on into 1941. Her brother Clive Currie, recalled from the AIF, was entrusted with running the family estate as well as ‘Gala’, his own adjoining property. In due course Gyp saw her son Tony through Melbourne Grammar into the Royal Australian Navy in 1945–6 before he returned on Clive Currie’s death to take up farming at Eildon. Eventually, persuaded by Ford Guthrie and Chettie Manifold that it was his duty, Tony Street followed his father into federal politics. He was well-liked and respected in Canberra and held a succession of Cabinet posts in Malcolm Fraser’s coalition government, serving finally as Minister for Foreign Affairs 1980–83. Like his father, he was an enthusiastic cricketer, golfer, and flyer. Daughter Tim, like her mother a free spirit, fine horsewoman, golfer, and tennis player, married Gregor Gillespie and settled to a life on the land at Berry Bank, 10 miles down the road from the family property ‘Eildon’ at Lismore.

Among the large military presence at Geoff Street’s funeral, Major W. J. R. Scott was observed to be representing the Army Minister’s parents who were in Sydney. Jack Scott was Street’s cousin. He was serving in intelligence at Melbourne’s Victoria Barracks in August 1940 and was sent down to ‘Eildon’ to retrieve all of the official papers that the Army Minister had taken home. Gyp Street had met Scott in London during the first war. He had been in love with her then before she married. But she had not seen him again for over 20 years. Their friendship was to be rekindled after 1945. Childless and recently divorced for the second time, Scott had spent years in Japanese captivity after his ‘Gull’ force battalion was captured in Ambon. Sadly his reputation never recovered from his alleged too-easy compliance with his captors. He had told Gyp that what had kept him going during his years of internment had been the thought of her. Touched, sorry for him, and feeling an obligation to respond to his proclaimed devotion, Gyp married Scott in 1948. A man of some mystery in his middle years, and shunned by many of his former wartime comrades, Scott would struggle with his demons until his death eight years later.

For Dick Elford’s parents the pain of his loss could not be masked by the emotional reticence of the many letters they had to write: ‘We were very proud of Dick and felt sure that he had a great future before him,’ his father wrote to

34 Scott had been divorced in 1926 and on 8 February 1930 had married a widow, Andree Adelaide Oatley, née Kaeppel. After their divorce in 1948, on May 5 he married Gyp Street. He died in Adelaide in November 1956. I am grateful to Mrs ‘Tim’ Gillespie for information about her mother and Scott (telephone interview, 31 Jan. 2010).
Sir John Latham. ‘Every one has been most kind in trying to soften the blow as much as possible by bearing tribute to the high regard in which Dick was held.’ They appreciated the references the Prime Minister and other ministers made to him in the House of Representatives. Mackenzie King, the Prime Minister of Canada, had taken the trouble to send a message to Audrey Elford saying ‘that he had seen quite a lot of Dick in Canada and had formed a very high opinion of him and had thought that he had a great future ahead of him’. The Geelong Grammar School magazine commended ‘a particularly loyal old boy’ who had been on the committee of the Old Geelong Grammarians’ Association since 1929.

Although Archie Elford was to tell Dr Darling that the family could not afford the fees, junior school places were found in 1946 for the twins. Hugh left after three years, his mother having been encouraged by the headmaster to guide him towards a non-academic path. His later life of service in employment, accommodation and advocacy associations for people with disabilities was acknowledged with an OAM. David, who was to have a distinguished career as a mechanical engineer and inventor, stayed at the school until 1951. He won a Commonwealth scholarship for university study but thought it unreasonable to his mother to take it. In search of a ‘career without a degree’ he was introduced to several of his grandfather’s business friends before finding a berth in an engineering firm. After many years of design innovation and business success while struggling with gender disphoria, he eventually emerged as the vivacious Dianne Boddy, whose husband Harold had been a contemporary of her father’s at Geelong Grammar.

What Audrey Elford and her parents-in-law knew was that Dick had been longing to be set free from his civilian employment so that he could join the Air Force. His heart was set on becoming a combat flyer as his boss once had been, like the flamboyant, ever mischievous young men who were rapidly rising to prominence in the RAAF. The Rev. J. H. Allen, the Geelong Grammar chaplain, had read the burial service for both Fairbairn and Elford at the Springvale cemetery. But in a final loving gesture, the family decided to release Dick’s ashes from the air over the city. Freddie Thomas and Bob Dalkin of No. 2 Squadron, with a crew dressed in their best blues, took a Hudson up over the coast on the eastern side of Port Philip Bay. Dalkin was given the task of dispersing the contents of the urn. All those aboard the aeroplane learned something that day about the airflow over the fuselage of a Hudson.

As for the remains of Lockheed Hudson A16-97, their destiny was written on RAAF form E/E.88, ‘Record Card Airframes, Aero Engines and Mechanical

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36 Dianne Boddy to CH, (email), 9, 10 Jan. 2011. Hugh Elford’s adult years are part of *the snow girl story*, the memoir by his wife, Jennifer Laycock Elford.
Transport’. The Air Member for Organisation and Equipment approved their ‘conversion to components’ on 27 August 1940. Not much was reusable. The Service Court of Inquiry had concluded: ‘Aircraft completely burnt with exception of portion of starboard mainplane, tail plane, stabilizers and rudder.’ The unserviceable residue was dumped at the Canberra tip, then in the inner suburb of Reid. At least one propeller found its way there, to be discovered and retrieved by a fossicking Commonwealth Commissioner of Patents, Harold Wilmot. A metallurgist, Wilmot was interested in the properties of the propeller’s new material, duraluminum, a blend of aluminium, copper, and magnesium. From Wilmot one blade of the propeller was eventually passed on together with his home forge to his senior public service colleague Sir Roland Wilson of the Treasury. Wilson would fill idle retirement moments by fashioning ashtrays and toys from molten slices of the metal. Sixty-seven years after the crash, the last blade was the centrepiece of a small display cabinet in the National Museum of Australia. In addition to whatever else could be salvaged, the Twin Row Wasp engines, 2845L (port) and 2853R (starboard), were ‘converted’. The Service Court of Inquiry had recorded that the engines were ‘completely burnt and of no further use except possibly for instruction’. But they had not allowed for the resourcefulness of the mechanics. The fate of the Wasps was to furnish replacement parts for their surviving but worn or damaged siblings.

Those who remained

Of Bob Hitchcock’s fellow cadets, the stories of some of those who survived after 13 August 1940 tell us what might have been for him. Flight Lieutenant Johnny Bell was to be the first RAAF pilot who died on active service, killed while attempting a daring rescue of General De Gaulle’s family from northern Brittany in June 1940. Squadron Leader Norman Hick survived until his No. 10 Squadron Sunderland crashed on landing at Pembroke Dock, Milford Haven in June 1941. Don Macpherson, whose distinguished pass in June 1936 was
a harbinger of future success, became the first commanding officer of the Point Cook Signals School; a Wing Commander aged 28, Macpherson died when the MV *Melbourne Star* was sunk in the Atlantic in 1943. Bob’s friend Wing Commander Bill Keenan DFC commanded No. 13 Squadron during the war and retired as an honorary Group Captain in 1960. By late 1941 Bill Allshorn was CO of No. 21 Squadron in Malaya but was relieved ‘on account of unsatisfactory leadership in connection with air operations’. He would go on to command No. 4 Squadron and No. 5 EFTS and end the war as a Wing Commander. Eric V. Read had survived a crash in bad weather in December 1936 which saw him unable to fly for nine months; he ended the war as a Wing Commander AFC. Squadron Leader G. J. Quinan, promoted temporary flight lieutenant in February 1940 (with effect from 1 September 1939), commanded the Australian Army Co-operation Squadron in 1941 and was senior instructor in the new Army Air Co-operation School in 1942; he transferred to the CAF Reserve at his own request in February 1945 after leading both No. 4 and No. 5 Squadrons in New Guinea. Ted Fyfe commanded No. 21 Squadron, was awarded a DSO, and retired as a Group Captain CBE in 1969 after a series of senior staff appointments.

In a massively expanded air force, there were operational and administrative posts for all of the pre-war generation who survived. Gerry Buscombe, for example, was promoted squadron leader and, 16 days after Bob Hitchcock’s death, given command of the new No. 7 Elementary Flying Training School in Tasmania. Three years later Eric Lansell, now a Wing Commander, took over 7 EFTS. He had previously commanded the Armament Training Station at Laverton. Early in 1945 Wing Commander Norman ‘Phil’ Ford was appointed to head the Central Flying School at Point Cook. Air Marshal Sir Colin Hannah would rise through operational and administrative posts during the war, reach the pinnacle of the RAAF in 1970 as Chief of the Air Staff, retire early, and

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42 KEENAN, William James NAA: A12372 R/342/H,P. Keenan’s DFC citation referred to his ‘conspicuous leadership and ability’ but his postwar career stalled with ‘below average’ assessments of his ‘inexpressive personality’.
43 NAA: A9300, QUINAN GJ.
44 FYFE, Edwin Glen NAA: A12372 R/340/H,P.
then serve a controversial term as Governor of Queensland. After several years in the RAF, Dickie Cohen returned to Australia with a DFC and a glowing reputation; aged 27, he was promoted Group Captain in 1943, and held a series of senior training and HQ posts before beginning a public service career as Richard Kingsland in 1947. He became Secretary of the Departments of the Interior, Repatriation and Veterans’ Affairs. Knighted in 1978, he was appointed an Officer (AO) of the Order of Australia in 1989. He died in August 2012, the last of Hitchcock’s cadet contemporaries.

A fatal decision?

In August 1940, 25-year-old Sergeant Jo Gullett of the AIF was attending a British Army tactical school in Cairo. He learned of his father’s death from the senior officer of the school, before receiving a cable from his mother who had been in Sydney, returning from a holiday in Queensland with her daughter Sue. He returned briefly to Australia, finding his mother like the other widows in great shock ‘accentuated…by the unavoidably public nature of the church services and funerals’. Assured that his father’s farm was in the hands of a capable neighbour, and confident that his mother ‘always kept a firm hand in her affairs’, he set his face again to the war. ‘I was sad to leave my mother and sister in the large house, but at least they were comfortable among friends. It did not occur to anyone that I should not return to the battalion.’

45 Five airmen also graduated as Temporary Sergeant Pilots in July 1936: Lou Lohse, after nine years in the Permanent RAAF enrolled in the Air Force Reserve in 1938 and was appointed by ANA as an instructor, captained DC-2s and DC-3s, joined BCPA, re-joined the RAAF, and was discharged as a F/Lt (NAA: A9301/2, A9300, 2002/05090488; see also the No. 22 Squadron Association web site). Kenneth Berry, mustered on enlistment as a W/T operator, graduated third with a distinguished pass, was discharged to the Reserve in 1937 on appointment to Qantas; he returned as an F/O in Sept. 1939, was promoted F/Lt 1943, served briefly with No. 36 Squadron in Merauke before resuming civil occupation in 1945 (NAA: A9301, A9301/2, A9300, 2002). Reginald Peverell, formerly a PMG telephone mechanic and RCA instrument adjuster, then a RAAF W/T operator mechanic, was discharged in 1937 ‘at own request, on payment of £24 0s 0d’ after barely passing the ‘ab initio’ seaplane training course; enrolled in the Reserve while a Qantas First Officer, he died after a motor accident in 1938 (NAA: A9301, 2002/04901212). Cliff Tuttleby DFC AFM, commissioned in June 1941, served with Nos 7, 8 and 100 Squadrons in Beaufort bomber operations over New Guinea 1942–3, No. 24 Squadron in B24 Liberators over Morotai, North Moluccas 1944–45; RAAF ‘mutiny’ New Guinea 1943; discharged as F/Lt 1947 (NAA: A9300, TUTTLEBY CE; Recorded interview with Fred Morton, 1980, Imperial War Museum 9670). Douglas Edwin Morgan, enlisted in 1933 after a year in CAF, experienced in motor and general engineering, served at No.1 A.D. with Hitchcock; a warrant officer and flying instructor by 1938, he was posted to the General Reconnaissance School in April 1940; commissioned in 1942, promoted F/Lt (temp.) 1944; Milne Bay with No. 33 Squadron 1943–44; transferred to Reserve Aug. 1945 (NAA: A9300, A9301 2002).


Though their wealth was modest — Gullett’s real and personal estate was sworn at £13,265 — Penny Gullett and her children had been well provided for through her mother’s will. She would not need her husband’s gold railway pass, which as the widow of a minister who had served for three years, she was entitled to keep. In time, however, Orchard Cottage would prove too big and expensive to keep up. Staff were almost impossible to find. She moved into a flat in South Yarra. As Jo moved on with other Australian forces from North Africa to New Guinea, Melbourne was swamped by American troops. Jo’s sister Sue, like many impressionable young Australian women, was swept off her feet by an American officer, an assistant military attaché at the American legation, and went as a war bride to the United States. The marriage did not last. She remarried in 1948 to a British oil company executive, Paul Hackforth-Jones.

A daughter departed, and anxious not to lose her son as well as her husband, Penny Gullett contrived to get Jo the UAP pre-selection for his father’s old seat of Henty for the 1943 election. To his relief, he was defeated by the sitting Independent, Arthur Coles. Major Gullett, as he had become, would not return to New Guinea but was posted to England to serve with the British Army. Returning from the war an infantry company commander with an MC, and rare personal experiences for an Australian officer of D-Day and the battle of Normandy, he was easily elected to the House of Representatives when Arthur Coles chose not to run again in 1946. Jo was not a natural parliamentarian. Although he became Chief Whip for the Menzies government, he was never completely comfortable with the sacrifice of independence that party politics demanded. As the Prime Minister reflected on learning of Gullett’s retirement, he had been ‘rather ready to reconcile the office of Government Whip with that of chief Government critic’. After a term as Ambassador to Greece he returned to farming at ‘Lambrigg’ on the Murrumbidgee.

Jo Gullett was to publish two acclaimed autobiographical works — a war memoir and a fine evocation of his early life with an admiring but believable portrait of his father. Convivial, plainspoken, a vivid writer and raconteur, Jo had a good ‘drinking friend’, Group Captain Dixie Chapman. They met regularly in the Naval and Military Club in Melbourne. Chapman, a career officer with a farming background, had served with mixed success through the war and postwar period, earning by his own admission ‘a somewhat dubious erstwhile reputation as a drinker’. He had been commissioned as a pilot officer in 1935 after instruction on Wapitis by Eric Douglas who, with Charles Eaton, had

48 The Argus, 16 Aug. 1940.
49 Their daughter, Penne Hackforth-Jones, would enjoy a successful career as an actress and biographer of her great-grandmother, Barbara Baynton. Her death was announced in May 2013.
51 Not as a Duty Only: an infantryman’s war, MUP, 1976.
buried Bob Hitchcock’s father in the Tanami. He was a flying instructor at Point Cook the following year. Promoted rapidly, he was a flight lieutenant by 1938, and in July 1939 became Deputy Director of Training at RAAF headquarters. On 1 June 1940 he was made a squadron leader though he was not appointed to a squadron until the end of the year.\(^{52}\)

One afternoon at the club, the conversation turned to Jo Gullett’s father and the events of August 1940. Chapman had an extraordinary tale. About a fortnight before the crash, he said, he had taken Bob Hitchcock for his annual flying test. Coming in to land Hitchcock had lost flying speed. Chapman told him to ‘give it a gun’ and go round again. The same thing happened. Chapman took over the controls himself. Alarmed by what he had seen, Chapman failed the No.2 Squadron flight commander. Hitchcock, he ruled, was not to captain again until he had sorted out his problem. Hitchcock appealed against the suspension. Then, Chapman said, the Minister for Air personally overrode the decision.\(^{53}\)

The story was startling. Nothing that would confirm it emerged from the archives. Could it possibly have been true? Why would Chapman, holding a headquarters post, have been taking Hitchcock’s flying test, normally the task of a senior officer at Laverton? Could the story be verified? The first and most obvious question is whether Hitchcock was due for a test at the time Chapman indicated. To that question the answer would seem to be ‘yes’. He had been put through his paces for the ‘RAAF Annual Confidential Report (Officers)’ in June 1939. Unfortunately, the documents presented to the inquiries in 1940, and files released later to scholars, contain no such report (Form P/P 29) by Hitchcock’s CO for 1940. If a flying test had not been taken it was also probably overdue. Hitchcock had been at No. 2 Squadron for over a year. Possibly, because of the heavy training and operational demands of the first year of war the annual assessment due in June had been deferred.\(^{54}\) But if a flying test had been taken where was the report?

Was there anything else to lend credence to Chapman’s story? Could he be placed at Laverton at the right time? The logical place to look was Hitchcock’s flying log book. There, in Hitchcock’s own hand, we find an entry for Thursday, 25 July 1940 with several unusual names. Hitchcock had taken Hudson No. 54 for an hour and a half. The stated ‘duty’ was ‘Cloud flying & compass swing.’ There were three other people with him. None had flown with him in recent months. They were not pupils under his command. Under the heading ‘2\(^{nd}\) Pilot, Pupil or Passenger’ are three names: ‘Hilder Chapman F/L Kingwell.’ It was an

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52 CHAPMAN, Dixie Robison, NAA: A12372 R/335/P
54 I have not noticed a report written in 1940 in any other personnel files. There is a gap in the reports on F/Lt then S/Ldr Frank Headlam between one signed in June 1939 and another for the period March 1940 to Feb. 1941 (NAA: A12372, R/331/P). S/Ldr K. Parsons had a report from Dec. 1939 to Feb. 1941 (NAA: A12372, R/337/P).
extraordinary group. Brett Hilder was a 29-year-old former merchant marine officer with an Extra Master’s ticket, who had been called up from the naval reserve into the RAN at the beginning of the war. Appalled at the lowly status he was given and the exiguous pay he was receiving, Hilder effectively absconded from the Navy and offered his services to the RAAF. After passing a navigation instructors’ conversion course with ‘special distinction’ he was happily received into the RAAF fold on secondment on 13 May 1940. ‘Although I knew nothing about Air Navigation itself, my knowledge of navigation generally was possibly superior to that of anyone else in Australia.’ His navigation expertise, such as it was, being at a premium in the Air Force he was now assisting at Point Cook as a navigation reconnaissance instructor, temporary flight lieutenant, with special knowledge of naval co-operation.55

Flight Lieutenant Deryck Kingwell’s assignment at the time was leading the instructional work on the navigation reconnaissance course. Among his pupils were Dick Wiesener, Bob Dalkin, Bill White, and Peter Fowler. The presence of Kingwell and Hilder in A16-54 suggests that Hitchcock was being given some pointers to assist him in his own work with the young officers in his flight whom he was familiarising with the Hudson. Compass swinging — calculating the compensation required to adjust for deviations caused by the proximity of metal objects, magnetic fields, and electrical equipment, including radios — was normally done on the ground. But, as it was the Hudson’s undercarriage that was causing problems with the pilots’ compasses, the calculations had to be done in the air. Kingwell was with Hitchcock again two days later in a different aircraft for compass swinging and preparation of the deviation card for A16-80.56

And ‘Chapman’? In a photograph of officers of No. 2 Squadron taken by the squadron photographer Frank Jefferies late in August 1940, sitting in the front row between Flight Lieutenants Neville Hemsworth and Ray Garrett is a ‘Chapman’.57 However, this Chapman appears from his uniform to be a flight lieutenant, and was in fact F. B. Chapman of the RAAF Reserve who was posted to the squadron on August 17 and began his Hudson conversion course with

55 For the tale of Brett Hilder’s self-initiated conversion from the Navy to the Air Force, see his Navigator in the South Seas, pp.81–5.
57 Bennett, Highest Traditions, p.112. Bennett does not date the photograph; but it cannot be earlier than 26 August 1940 when Hemsworth joined the squadron.
27. Aftermath

Jack Ryland two days later. Of Squadron Leader Dixie Chapman there is no sign. Service records throw no light on his possible role at Laverton in those weeks.

The story as Jo Gullett recalled it is impossible to verify. Was Chapman conflating several episodes? Remembering perhaps something that had happened at Point Cook in 1936 when he was a flight commander and flying instructor? Or a flight in August 1939 when Hitchcock was undergoing dual instruction with him in an NA33. Though it is possible, this seems unlikely. In the latter case, Hitchcock was in the air twice more the same day, three times the day after, and again twice three days on. Chapman does not appear to have been with him again at this time during which his airmanship was being assessed. Whatever truth there was in Dixie Chapman’s recollections, there is no evidence to suggest that Hitchcock’s flying was significantly interrupted in the weeks after he went up with him, together with Hilder and Kingwell, on Thursday July 25. Hitchcock’s logbook tendered to the Service Court of Inquiry shows him doing instrument flying, cloud flying, photography, local night flying, and flight formation with various crews on an almost daily basis from July 27 to August 11. It is inconceivable that so serious a matter as a recommendation to suspend a flight commander’s right to captain an aircraft could have been written up, endorsed, forwarded to a higher authority, and overruled in the space of a day.

Did Jo Gullett misunderstand what his companion said? Could Chapman have embellished his story? He had a reputation in later years for a ‘wingeing attitude re his career’ (Val Hancock) and exaggerating ‘situations and circumstances’ (Colin Hannah). But surely this was too poignant a subject of which to speak lightly to the son of a man who perished. Could it have been that on that July 25 flight Chapman, then Deputy Director of Training, had been so concerned about what he saw that he spoke of it to No. 2 Squadron’s CO? Did he urge some dramatic action to improve Hitchcock’s performance? Did Freddie Thomas, knowing of the degree of political protection that Hitchcock had enjoyed, decide there was no point in taking the matter further? Thomas would, after all, have had the comfort of knowing that Ryland, a tough instructor, had certified Hitchcock as competent to fly the Hudson. Everyone knew that the Hudson could be tricky to handle. One imperfect episode was hardly a justification for blighting a man’s career.

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58 NAA: A9300, CHAPMAN FB; Flying Log Book of J. P. Ryland, Aug.–Sept. 1940, Ryland Papers, NLA MS 5020 Box 1. I am grateful to Martin James, Senior Historical Officer, Office of Air Force History, for help with this identification (email, 6 March 2008).

59 Apart from normal routine duties, as Deputy Director of Training Chapman ‘engaged in the formulation of the Empire Air Training Scheme plan as applicable to the R.A.A.F, examining civilian flying training schools…and flight testing civilian flying instructors’ (CHAPMAN Dixie Robison, NAA: A12372 R/335/H).


61 NAA: A12372 R/335/H.
If official records that would illuminate Chapman’s story ever existed it is easy to imagine why they might have been purposely mislaid. Like so many elements of the story of A16-97 we are left with uncertainty. Some of that uncertainty was undoubtedly deliberately created. The fate of the 10 men whose journeys ended in Duncan Cameron’s farm was poorly explained in 1940. The rush to conclusion suited the Air Force. It was politically convenient. For the children and grandchildren of the victims, for their surviving friends and comrades, for all who still seek answers to questions that should have been asked long ago, the truth about Bob Hitchcock’s last flight remains elusive.
This text is taken from *Ten Journeys to Cameron’s Farm: An Australian Tragedy*, by Cameron Hazlehurst, first published 2013, this version 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.