

FIRE FROM THE SKY

Australia's worst aviation related disaster

The devastating crash at Jackson's 7 mile, Port Moresby in 1943, claimed the lives of many of our brave jungle fighters. 71 years on, Australia's greatest aviation disaster calls the attention of our Remembrance.

By Gary Traynor

The preparation and equipment check was complete. Transfers to Durand's Marshalling area had gone off without a hitch. Now they simply had to wait. Some men dozed in the darkness whilst others smoked and chatted idly. Soon the convoy would commence the 17 mile journey to Durand's Airstrip. Many of the waiting diggers had served in Syria. Most had fought on the Kokoda Trail; however a sprinkling of reinforcements bolstered their ranks. In the quiet corner of each man's mind, veteran and reinforcement alike pondered the fight which lay ahead. Their destination was Nadzab in preparation for the assault upon Lae, against a tough and tenacious foe. It

was the first time an entire Australian Division, approximately 3,000 men was to be airlifted to a war zone. The 7th of September 1943 would be a day to remember in the New Guinea campaign. For the men of the 2/33rd Infantry Battalion AIF, it would be a morning they would struggle to forget.

At the opposite end of Jackson's airfield, Pratt & Whitney engines of an American B-24 turned over in the pre-dawn darkness. Flight Officer Howard J. Wood busily worked through his pre- take off checks. Hailing from Nebraska U.S.A, Wood's mount was christened "Pride of the Cornhuskers" in honour of his home state. At a cost of \$297,627.00 to the U.S. taxpayer, it was a huge

responsibility for a 21 year old boy. Not to mention the lives of his ten crew members, preparing themselves for an armed reconnaissance flight to Rabaul.

The U.S. 403rd Bombardment Squadron, part of the 43rd Bomb Group – 5th Air Force had converted from B-17s to B-24's earlier that year. The long ranging Liberators were believed more suitable for the distances traversed in the south west Pacific theatre. This 'D' model Liberator could normally carry a bomb load of 12 x 500 lb bombs when not fitted with supplementary fuel tanks. However on this day, the aircraft would be fortuitously armed with just 4 x 500 pounders. With such a reduced bombload, "Pride of the Cornhuskers" could manage the return trip under her standard internal tanks totalling 2,800 gallons. With a total log of 628 hours, Wood had already accumulated 420 hours in Liberators; 97 of them flown within the past three months. His Commanding Officer, Lt. Colonel Harry J HAWTHORNE described Wood as an 'experienced pilot'.

Beyond the end of the runway, the ground was relatively flat and clear for a distance of approximately 1000 yards. A low ridge, peppered with trees ran perpendicular to the runway. On the reverse side of this ridge, the ground dropped steadily away to form a small valley through which a creek ambled lazily. The undulating ground then rose gently to form a second ridge, much lower than the first. This second ridge was later determined to be 25 feet lower than runway elevation. Capable of housing a large number of vehicles, this rise was designated the marshalling area for troop transport vehicles bound for Durand's airstrip. This entire area was designated the 7 Australian Division Marshalling area and lay approximately half a mile from the eastern end of 7 mile drome. When chosen, nobody envisaged that this low lying ground could be in harm's way. To the east of Durand's was Ward's Marshalling area; with Jackson's area being furthest from the airfield. The series of small hills and re-entrants could comfortably accommodate the embussing of an entire AIF battalion. As such, 18 trucks sat at Durand's marshalling area containing men from



Left:

Third and fourth vehicles in the line of Don Company at Durand's marshalling area.

An aircraft propeller can be seen protruding on an angle from the cabin (left of arrow nominating Truck No. 3).

Image: AWM 072911



Above:

VX1 General Sir Thomas Blamey, GBE, KCB, CMG, DSO, (right) Commanding Allied Land Forces, South West Pacific Area, chatting to members of the 7th Australian Division before they are flown into the forward area. This was the first time a complete Australian infantry division had been entirely airborne. Pictured, left to right: DX116 Private (Pte) A Stew; NX37382 Pte B Slade; VX78975 Pte R F Bird; NX80817 Pte R L Devenport; unidentified (obscured), and NX58770 Pte E L B Hughes. All except Pte Hughes and General Blamey were killed in an aircraft accident the next day, 7 September 1943

Image: AWM 030140/10



Above:

Military truck, clearly showing the prop from 'Pride of the Cornhuskers' lodged in the back of the vehicle.

Captain Ferguson's vehicle is in the background, with truck No. 2 obscured behind the two soldiers. 62 Australians lost their lives as a result of this incident

Image courtesy of: P.D. Alexander, Leroy Spillyards Collections)

A, C and D companies of the 2/33rd Infantry Battalion. The lead truck for 'D' Company (known as Don Company) contained Captain John Boyd Ferguson. A popular officer, he served with this unit in Syria when he was injured. Having recovered from his wounds, this would be his first action against the Japanese. Ferguson sat on the passenger seat of the 3 ton Chevy with the driver seated to his right in the small, cramped cabin.

For drivers of the 158 General Transport Company it was just another routine day. Their passengers had already been delayed 24 hours as a result of bad weather over the Owen Stanley's. However today's conditions looked promising. Fully loaded with small arms ammunition and grenades, the diggers could expect to be in action within a day or so. Some carried 2" mortars, others stowed spare magazines for the Bren guns. As such, they were fully prepared for what lay ahead. Or so they thought. Douglas DC-3 Dakotas at Durand's Airfield awaited their arrival. Their destination had been named in honour of a P-39 pilot who went missing in action during April 1942.

The official battalion history by Bill Crooks titled "The Footsoldiers" records the departure of the first aircraft on that fateful morning. Noting the 'deep-throated blast' and roar of aero engines at 4.20am, aircraft lights were seen through the trees on the far ridge. A Liberator passed overhead at an

estimated height of 100 feet causing one soldier to remark "Christ! He was close. I hope we don't stay here too long". Well away from Durand's marshalling area, Flight Officer Wood lined up on the western end of the runway. The strip was deemed to be of sufficient length for B-24's to safely complete their take off run and 'Pride of the Cornhuskers' would be the second aircraft to depart this morning. One witness at the eastern end of the runway; Corporal Angus O'BRIEN of the 3rd Australian Divisional Provost Company gave the following evidence at the official inquiry:- " On the morning of 7 September 1943, I was on convoy duty. At approximately 0430 hours, convoy was halted at the top end of Jackson's drome facing the drome. I was at the head of the convoy which consisted of 18 vehicles. I heard the roar of the motors of a plane coming up the strip. I looked down the strip but could not at first see any plane. After a few seconds I noticed a fire which outlined the plane engine coming towards me. The fire appeared to be in the cowling of the engine. I glanced back along the convoy and when I looked again the plane was passing overhead. I noticed that it was a Liberator and that the fire was in an engine on the port side of the plane. I estimate that the height of the plane was approximately 30 feet. The breeze from the plane blew the hats off some of the men in the truck. The convoy started

to move off and had travelled about 50 yards when I heard the sound of two almost simultaneous explosions come from the direction of the marshalling area. I looked back and noticed a glow in the sky."

This report of explosions and a 'glow in the sky' heralded the worst aviation related disaster in Australian history. For reasons unknown, the B-24 failed to gain sufficient height and hurtled towards the men on the ground. Soldiers yelled of the impending danger but there was no time to take evasive action. The port wing sheared off when it struck a tree on the downward slope, across the other side of the creek. Like a wounded bird, the huge bomber came crashing down onto the hillside near Durand's marshalling area - spewing forward a wave of burning aviation fuel. Five lorries were hit by flying wreckage and engulfed in the resulting fire which turned 'night into day'. The lorry occupied by Captain Ferguson appeared to take the full shock of the explosion and overturned. The lorry rolled onto the passenger side and the body weight of the driver pinned Captain Ferguson inside the cabin. Both men were incinerated. A three bladed prop broke free and slammed into the second lorry behind that of Captain Ferguson. The twisted blades and propeller hub lodged into the cabin - coming to rest in the passenger tray which had been full of men.

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Neville Edgar LEWIS, a 22 year old Regimental Signaller from H.Q. Company, was on loan to Don Company with two other signallers, Bill ALEXANDER and Alan FURNANCE. He said "I was in the No. 1 truck that Captain Ferguson was in there were 21 of us in there. I did not know Captain Ferguson very well as I was normally in H.Q. Company. I was sitting in the back of the truck on a 108 wireless set and just dozing when I heard the noise. I looked out and remember seeing the shape of a plane and then the nose hit the truck and I was flung out and knocked unconscious. I was taken to the hospital and was burned on my legs, arms, back & a head injury. And they took a slice to the second bottom part of my spine. I spent 9 WEEKS in hospital due to my injuries. There was 15 killed out of the 21 in the first truck".

The small valleys and re-entrants became rivulets of burning aviation fuel. Screams of pain and despair were drowned out by explosions as the flames reached the ammunition in the vehicles. Human torches ran or rolled around on the ground. Veteran Bill Crooks wrote that diggers would suddenly "disappear as the grenades or 2 inch mortar bombs they were carrying in their clothes or equipment, exploded".

Two of the 500 lb bombs exploded immediately upon impact. A third bomb exploded a short time later. However the fourth bomb failed to explode and lodged underneath a lorry occupied by men of 'C' Company. When Lieutenant Ray Whitfield jumped from the vehicle and tripped over an object, he looked down and saw the tail fins of the 500 pounder lodged behind the front wheels. He said loudly "Christ, please don't go off". Ray was the last to leave that vehicle.

Both the U.S.A.A.F. and 7th Australian Division conducted an investigation into the crash. The official U.S. report concluded the crash to be the result of 90% pilot error and 10% weather. The Australian court of inquiry concluded the cause of the crash will always remain a mystery, indicating there was no evidence of any neglect on the part of the pilot. This accident took place in the pre-dawn darkness. Whilst there was a slight mist in the low ground along the creek line, witnesses near the end of the airfield indicated the weather was clear. As it was still dark, Flight Officer WOOD had carried out the take-off under instrument conditions. The U.S. report states that he failed to climb to a sufficient altitude before lowering



Above:

The crew of 'Pride of the Cornhuskers' during training in the United States. The aircraft in the background is not the subject B-24 in which the crash occurred.

Image courtesy of: Crew members family

the nose of the aircraft to increase his airspeed. The report goes on to claim, "Going directly from contact to instrument flying in B-24 aircraft, immediately after take-off is trying on the best of pilots, for flight instruments can very easily give erratic readings at the moment the aircraft becomes airborne". Lieutenant Colonel HAWTHORNE, U.S. Army Air Corps stated that under ordinary circumstances, an aircraft should have no difficulty in making the necessary height with the length of runway available. Prior to the impact, a number of witnesses had reported seeing flames emitting from a port side engine. Lieutenant Colonel HAWTHORNE discounted engine failure, stating that in normal circumstances, flames frequently emerge from the supercharger of an engine.

Experts claim a pilot does not fully know his aircraft until he has at least 1000 hours in type. With 420 hours in the Liberator, could this horrific accident simply be written off as pilot error? With absolutely no evidence to support this, rumours of the time claimed Mexican enlisted men were saboteurs. This allegation is said to have resulted in service crews entering an unwilling lottery, the loser joining the aircrew on that particular combat mission as a way of discouraging sabotage. If this practice did occur, it was not enforced for very long.

Certainly the elaborate Air Crash Investigation and Forensic resources were not available in 1943 as they are now. It can be said that air force authorities could not, and did not allocate sufficient time and resources into investigating the cause of the crash. However with the luxury of time and sufficient manpower, a more

comprehensive conclusion may have been reached in modern times. Tasked with transporting an entire Australian division, the 5th Air Force faced a huge work load during September 1943 and time simply did not exist.

Despite any uncertainty, what can be proved is the moral fibre of the men whom performed their duty in the aftermath of this tragic crash. The courage of the U.S. fire fighters, clad in asbestos suits who walked directly into the flames on a rescue mission is without question. And the bravery of diggers who thought of their mates, before themselves is reflected by a quote from the official 7th Division Inquiry:- "At the time of the crash there was not the slightest degree of panic and everyone who was able to do so, did what they could to assist the injured. Considerable presence of mind and initiative on the part of members present, no doubt contributed largely to minimising injuries and saving lives."

Sixty infantrymen of the 2/33rd Battalion and two drivers of the 158 General Transport Company lost their lives as a result of the crash. The eleven crew of "Pride of the Cornhuskers" also suffered a terrifying death. A total of 73 men died, with over 90 subjected to horrific burns. It is without doubt, Australia's worst aviation disaster, yet it remains one of the least documented incidents of the Second World War. ■

Author

Gary Traynor works in the heraldry section of the Australian War Memorial. Gary is a retired police officer having spent 21 years in the NSW Police Force and is a keen historian with a focus on Gallipoli and New Guinea. He has undertaken numerous battlefield study tours pertaining to Australian military history.