

'Cornhuskers' disaster victims remembered – 71 years on

Marion RSL sub-branch member Matt Sloan has led a delegation to Papua New Guinea – in memory of servicemen who died in the World War 2 'Pride of the Cornhuskers' incident.

At 4.20am on September 7, 1943, a United States Air Force Liberator bomber of that name was taking off from Port Moresby's 7-Mile landing strip (now Jackson International Airport). But, with a full fuel and bomb load, it clipped a row of trees. The left wing sheared off, and the aircraft ploughed into a waiting convoy of Studebaker trucks with soldiers from the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion aboard.

Investigation by Matt and his military research colleague Gary Traynor has established that 62 Australians died, with another 90 injured. All 11 US aircrew on the 'Pride of the Cornhuskers' were killed. It had been carrying four 500-pound bombs and was fuelled up with almost 12,000 litres of high-octane avgas.

Three of the bombs exploded. Machine-gun ammunition, mortar rounds and grenades being carried by the troops, who were in full battle kit, 'cooked off' as the fire spread.

Matt Sloan, 34, has developed a personal interest because his grandfather, Captain Jack Balfour-Ogilvy, subsequently became company commander of the Infantry unit that suffered the bulk of the casualties. He recalls that his grandfather was "affected deeply" by the incident: "As a young lieutenant at the time he had the grim self-appointed task of recovering his men for identification."

A court of enquiry found there had been a miscalculation of the lift required to clear trees at the end of the runway. The crash was ruled as pilot error.

All detail of the incident was suppressed, though, because of fear it might affect public morale. Military authorities ordered uninjured survivors straight into battle and warned them of dire consequences should

they talk. Letters were censored. Families of the dead simply received terse telegrams saying the men had been "accidentally killed in New Guinea" or "killed in an air accident in New Guinea".

To give them proper recognition at last, Matt took a plaque bearing the names of all 'Pride of the Cornhuskers' victims to the site on September 7 this year, the 71st anniversary of the disaster. Travelling with him, to unveil the plaque at precisely 4.20am, was one of the few survivors still alive today – Ron Bean, 93, of Canberra.

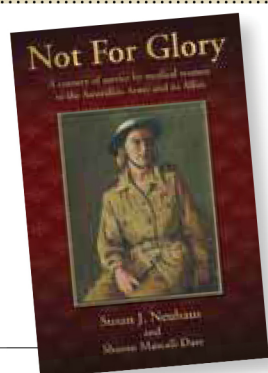
The delegation, which included two men whose fathers had been killed on that early morning in 1943, then laid poppies on graves in Port Moresby's Bomana War Cemetery.

Following the war, Matt's grandfather, who died in 1980 at the age of 62, became president of the Renmark RSL sub-branch. "For years afterwards he was haunted by nightmares," Matt says. "When we were leaving Port Moresby, we took off over the crash site. I shed a tear as we flew above it, knowing that I was about to return home – something that those 73 men were never able to do."



Memories of the 'Cornhuskers' disaster: (left) the rusted framework of a Studebaker truck cabin; a .303 round and ammunition clip; (below) survivor Ron Bean, 93, with local landholders and their families at the ceremony; (below right) Matt Sloan, accompanied by a standard-bearer, with the plaque and his grandfather's photograph

Footnote: 'Cornhuskers' is the official nickname given to the people of Nebraska.



JUST RELEASED

Not For Glory by Susan Neuhaus and Sharon Mascall-Dare

Stories for the ANZAC Centenary of the women who have served as medical professionals in the Australian Army from World War I until the present day. This landmark book features a number of South Australian women including Major Phoebe Chapple MM, who served on the Western Front, and the physiotherapist Di Fairhead (nee Skews), who served in Vietnam. Available now from ABC Shops, via Amazon.com or through the publisher, Boolarong Press. Price \$34.95.

(Full story in your next issue of The Signal)