

TASMANIA'S AVIATION DISASTER

by

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On a miserable Sunday evening 10th March 1946 one of the nation's greatest civil aviation disaster occurred off the shores of Seven Mile Beach, Tasmania. Four hours overdue, because of bad weather, a converted American World War II C-47, now an Australian National Airways (ANA) DC-3 VH-AET passenger carrying plane, owned by the William Holyman company landed at the old Cambridge Airport. Twenty one passengers were waiting to board this fateful flight. They had arrived earlier, but were told, literally, to "*come back*" as their plane was delayed at Essendon Airport.

The DC-3 carried four crew. Captain Thomas W. (Jack) Spence, a 30 year old ex RAAF man who had passed through the airliner's own training school and flown 1037 hours as a first officer. In April 1945 he had been promoted to captain and by now had 2580 hours flying time in command of aircraft, mostly DC-3s.

Captain Spence, however, had a disability, which incredibly he hid from the ANA administration and the doctors. He was a diabetic and if ANA had checked up with the RAAF why he was discharged, they would have found that it had been because he was a diabetic and hence medically unfit. This aspect would play a major part in the subsequent findings.

With him were Chief Officer Colburn (whose body was not found), Third Officer Gibson and petite 21 year old air hostess, Miss Pauline Trimmer.

Captain Spence landed the plane normally and alighted. The mechanical staff went to work quickly to check the plane for its return trip to Melbourne.

Captain Spence reported nothing abnormal happening on the way over. Oh, the lavatory light was out and the cabin heating system was not working,

otherwise everything was okay. He did mention that the plane had been struck by lightning after take off from Essendon, but outside of some mild shaking it did not affect the plane. He then made out his flight plan, was given the route forecast and latest weather and information from Western Junction. It was time to board again.

The 21 passengers were a mixed, generally, normal bunch. A mother-in-law travelling with her daughter-in-law, back to Melbourne. A couple posing as man and wife, when in reality they were actually married to others. There was the Acting Director of Health, Mr. E.J. Tudor and Mr G.W. Knight, father of well known Hydro figure, Sir Allan Knight. Eight of the passengers were Tasmanian. There were no children. They boarded just prior to 9pm and settled in for the 2 hours journey travelling at 150 knots to Melbourne.

The navigation lights of the plane were turned on. Spence had radioed that the receiver was noisy and that "*the weather wasn't too good*". At 8:55 pm it took off. There were storm clouds in the sky, a misty rain hung round, but between the clouds bright stars shone against the blackness of the sky. The water at Frederick Henry Bay was rough.

Refuelled with 330 gallons Spence used a different runway to the one he landed on. He headed into the south-west and climbed away. Everything seemed to be as usual.

One witness said the plane went in to a storm cloud, about a minute from the aerodrome.

Mr Kenneth Davis, radio operator called the pilot at 8:58 pm, but received no reply. He was not, at that stage, particularly concerned. He tried again at 9:08 again no answer. At 9:10pm he was informed the plane had crashed.

Mr James Wilson, a World War II veteran, watched the plane as it went into a gradual climb. It appeared to Mr Wilson that it wasn't rising as fast as it should have. Then the port wing dropped slightly as it was about to turn to port. As it did so the nose dropped rather steeply and it went down

to a fairly steep angle.

Mr Wilson did not see it hit the water, but he heard the crash. He immediately got in his car and arrived ten minutes later at Cambridge. He rushed into the ANA hanger and shouted for some one. Porter, Eric Hyland, answered his call and was told of the disaster.

Mrs Jessie Wilson confirmed her husband's statement; "*The plane went into a sudden descent at about an angle of 45 degrees towards the water. The cabin light and wing lights were alight. I heard a noise like a big stone dropping in the water. There wasn't any explosion.*"

Mr Wilson with Mr Hyland and Mechanic Mr Butler went straight away to the scene at Seven Mile Beach and with the arrival of the police began the recovery of bodies. The first on the scene was Police Trooper (as country police were then termed) Ron Chilcott from Sorell.

Mr Butler swam out through the rough water to the tail piece to which he attached a rope so that it could be dragged ashore.

The first body, of a woman was washed ashore at 1am. It was unrecognisable. The body of a man also badly mutilated was washed up 15 minutes later.

Bodies kept on being washed ashore over the next few days.

HMAS Mildura was dispatched from Hobart with three doctors and nurses aboard from the Royal Hobart Hospital. The patrol boat "Aralla" joined the search and from March 13 carried out dragging operations, which proved to be very difficult.

One body was recovered on shore two miles from the crash site. Most were horrifically mutilated. Other items washed up, coat-hangers, tennis racquets, women's powder compacts, petrol ration tickets, wallets containing notes, control wires from the cockpit, life belts, rugs, brief-cases, arm rests, hair and clothes brushes, shoes, boots and other articles came in with the breakers.

The pilot seat and the rear door also were washed ashore and part of the

fuselage was found tossed by the waves on to dry sand about two miles from the tail piece.

Over the succeeding months extensive inquiries followed. The last moments of the plane were analysed. It would appear that the plane dived towards the water dropping from a height of 450 feet, but it actually recovered itself. By then, sadly, it was too late as it was too close to the water. Its tail plane hit the waves, snapping the aircraft at the passenger door. This had the effect of dragging the control wiring straight through the aircraft and this was what killed most of the passengers. The control wires simply ripped through the cabin, answering the reason why many of the bodies were limbless or decapitated.

So what happened to cause the greatest aviation tragedy that peace-time Australia had ever known? Concern was centred on the medical condition of Captain Spence. He failed to reveal that he had ever suffered from diabetes or that he had ever been treated in hospital for such a condition. Mr Justice Simpson found that Captain Spence's condition played a role in the fatal crash. He believed Captain Spence could have suffered insulin reaction. Suddenly his mind and muscles were not coordinating and he nudged the control column forward and sent the aircraft into a shallow death dive. The autopsy, however, could give no hard supporting evidence that he did suffer a reaction.

The other major possibility is that the inexperienced co-pilot when asked to turn the cross-feed on, actually turned the autopilot on. This would have the effect of the plane reacting violently, pitching the aircraft, and causing the disaster.

Another possibility was that after takeoff the elevator shocks were left on, as these were never found, but this claim is unsubstantiated. One witness said that before takeoff, he noted that Captain Spence was not in the captain's seat.

Three witnesses, Mr Chris Bender, wife Elsie and Ross Bender, son, gave a different picture of the actual crash.

Mrs Bender said: "I heard a bang. I lifted the blind and saw a mass of fire come straight down to the water. It was an orange light and I saw another light to the left, which dropped slowly to the water. This orange light looked all aglow.

Her husband said, *"I heard an explosion, an exceptionally loud one. I thought the plane had exploded in the air. I saw the plane or a piece of it coming down through the air. I saw also two flares drift over towards the pine forests."*

Son, Ross, said: *"I saw what appeared to me a part of the cabin with a bright light on the other side of it. This part of the cabin sank down and disappeared from sight."*

Did the plane explode in mid-air and was it on fire before it hit the water?

The *"exceptionally loud bang"*, which Mr Bender Senior heard, remains unexplained. He heard the bang before it hit the water.

There was an open finding, so the true story will (perhaps) never be told.

FROM ONE WHO CAN RECALL.

An employee of the Holyman company, was John Puchas, who was working in the Hobart office at the time. He stated that he had received a report from a naval officer that the aircraft had crashed into the sea off seven mile beach.

"To confirm this," he said, "we tried for some time to contact the airport staff by phone without success.

"Then we tried to contact Air Radio (as it was then known) again without success. We then began to fear that the naval officer's comments were indeed true.

"A number of airport staff went to the site where the wreckage was and took part in the search for any survivors, but no survivors were found.

“There was little we could do in the city to assist in any way. Communications in those days, except for the telephone, were practically nil, so we could not get any information to keep us up-dated.

“Tragically a passenger personally known to me was on board,”

According to John, the person whom his family knew, lived in the flat below where he lived with his parents.

“What happened, was a tragic twist of fate,” he said.

The woman had been booked on a flight before March 10th. However, there was a policy if people had not paid for their tickets two days before, their names could be deleted from the passenger list. She had not paid, so her name was “scrubbed”. She was disappointed when John told her of the cancellation and asked to be booked on the first flight on the 10th.

“I did so, “said John.

“After learning of the crash, I went home - this would be about midnight - and told my father that the woman living downstairs would have been killed.

“Dad said ‘get to bed’ as I had to work again at 6am, adding that he would contact the family before they read the terrible news in The Mercury newspaper.

“Next morning after going back on duty it was quite strange, because no one mentioned the disaster which had occurred, even though it was on the front page of the newspaper.

John also states that the company gave no back-up or advice to the staff, even when he and a colleague later had to confront the official Inquiry.

“Every March 10th it still plays on my mind,” he said “when I relive that fateful day.”