

LOSS OF THE AIRLINER "LUTANA"

The most dramatic event in the history of Nundle was the crash of the Australian National Airways DC-3 airliner "Lutana" in 1948.

The aircraft, VH-ANK was on a flight from Brisbane to Sydney when it crashed into the top of Mt Crawney, about 7 kms south-west of Nundle, on the night of Thursday, September 3, 1948. Thirteen people lost their lives in this accident.

As a result of the subsequent enquiry, major changes were made to air traffic control procedures in Australia, and radio navigation equipment was considerably upgraded.

The "Lutana" took off from Brisbane's Archerfield Aerodrome at 5.35pm and flew south into bad weather. The pilot, Captain JA Drummond, would normally have used a radio range at Kempsey to guide him. However, some other pilots alleged at the enquiry that this may not have been working on the night of the accident.

Pilots in those days also sometimes used radio broadcasting stations for position guidance. It is thought by some people Captain Drummond may have homed in on 2AD Armidale thinking it was 2HD Newcastle. The two stations had close frequencies, and with the weather so bad, there would have been a great deal of static, making it difficult for the pilots to be certain of the station.

Whatever the reason, the aircraft flew steadily inland into the mountainous area east of Tamworth.

Then, at 7.56pm, the aircraft radioed that it was over Williamtown Air Force Base, and requested permission to descend from 6,000 feet (1830 metres) to 4,500 feet (1370 metres). Pilots knew they were over the top of radio ranges because they flew into a radio 'dead spot'. Some freak of radio must have caused Captain Drummond to believe he was over Williamtown at the time. In fact, he was 87 miles (140 kms) from that base and well inland when the aircraft crashed.

It was normal practice for pilots of that era to turn out to sea from Newcastle and descend towards Sydney where there was no land. Obviously, Captain Drummond thought that was what he was doing.

Instead, he must have been south-west of Tamworth when he turned and began descending in the darkness through snow, hail and rain until his aircraft struck the mountain peak.

THE VICTIMS

Some 13 people lost their lives in the crash of the Lutana.

Among them was Mrs Margaret Edgeworth McIntyre MLC of Launceston, who was the first woman Member of Tasmania's Legislative Council.

Another passenger was leading North Queensland jockey, Mr Frederick John Coughlan, of Townsville. He was flying to Melbourne to race there. His stirrup irons were found in the wreckage.

Pilot of the aircraft was Captain JA Drummond, of New Farm, Brisbane.

His co-pilot was First Officer JRA Atkinson, of Chemside, Brisbane.

The hostess on the flight was Miss Brenda Margaret Wise, of Elmhurst, Victoria. Miss Wise had trained as a nurse at Ararat and Maryborough Hospitals in Victoria before joining ANA. She was an accomplished horsewoman.

Other passengers were:

Mr Edmund Vincent Nelson, of East Brisbane

Mr Eugene Thomas Nelson, of Brighton Beach, Victoria

Mr William Joseph Falkiner, of Parkes, New South Wales

Miss Joyce Sotham, of Mackay, Queensland

Mr Arthur Van Andel, of Hawthorn, Victoria

Mr Charles John Rossiter, of Mascot, Sydney

Mrs LC Thompson, proprietress of the Country Club Hotel, Mackay, Queensland

At the time, the mountain was known by a number of names: Mt Square Top; Mount Sugarloaf; Mt Ben Evers; Ben Nevis; and Black Jack. Today, it is shown on maps as Mt Crawney, and it is 4,500 feet (1370 metres) high, The height to which Captain Drummond was descending. It is one of the highest peaks anywhere between Sydney and the Queensland border.

The aircraft made its last short radio transmission at 8.12pm. From stopped watches found in the wreckage, it seems the aircraft crashed at 8.15pm, only three minutes later.

When it was obvious the aircraft was overdue, a major search was conducted. Because the pilot's radio message saying he was turning out to sea from Williamtown, the search was concentrated in that area. An oil slick was found off the coast, and many people reported hearing an aircraft in the Wyong and Gosford area about 8.15pm.

But a senior pilot of East-West Airlines, Captain Ron Walesby, had a hunch that if the aircraft had flown inland to avoid bad weather, it could have struck one of the high mountains in the Great Dividing Range. He suggested to his colleagues they keep a watch over the mountains of the Liverpool Range, which includes Mt Crawney, on their daily flights between Sydney and Tamworth.

On Saturday, September 5, one of Captain Walesby's colleagues, Captain JC Paterson, spotted the wreckage shortly before 1pm while flying from Tamworth to Sydney in an East-West Airlines aircraft.

Searchers from Nundle, Wallabadah, Quirindi and Tamworth set off to find the wreckage. The going was so rough they had to complete the climb on foot. It was very cold, and there was snow on the ground round the wreckage. First on the scene was a Wallabadah grazier, Mr Fred Golland, who was one of a party of three. He found a scene of devastation, with the wreckage strung over 300 metres. There had been a great fire after the crash, and all but two of the bodies were burnt beyond recognition.

The aircraft had been flying slightly south of east when it hit ... consistent with the theory Captain Drummond thought he was heading out to sea.

Some 25 searchers spent a freezing night beside the wreckage before carrying the bodies down to Nundle. The remains were transported to Tamworth where an inquest was held. Several days later, they were buried in Tamworth Cemetery.

At first, the Federal Chifley Government resisted the holding of an inquiry, but public and Opposition pressure was such that the Minister for Air, Mr Drakeford eventually announced the appointment of Mr Justice Simpson to look into all aspects of the disaster.

His enquiry was long and searching, but he was unable to say definitely why the pilot was so far off course, and why his radio equipment did not indicate to him

his true position. Captain Drummond was a very experienced pilot, with wartime flying experience, and was regarded by his colleagues as very competent.

In his report, Mr Justice Simpson exonerated the pilot from blame. But he was scathing in his criticism of Department of Civil Aviation methods, especially air traffic control system, and the standard of equipment provided.

His report was strongly attacked in Parliament by Mr Drakeford, the Minister who had appointed him to make it. But Mr HF Walsh, manager of Australian National Airways, said Mr Drakeford's criticism was outrageous. Opposition members, including Mr Falkinder (Lib. Tasmania), a highly decorated wartime Pathfinder pilot, also condemned Mr Drakeford for his criticism, and said Mr Justice Simpson's report was as fair and impartial as was possible in the circumstances. Mr Falkinder was of the view that inadequacy of navigation aids was the only contributing factor to the crash.

In the event, the DCA air traffic control system was considerably overhauled, and better air navigation equipment was installed, so it cannot be said the 13 "Lutana" crash victims died in vain.

There was not a great deal of the aircraft left after the crash and fire. The tail was the only substantial part that was relatively intact. What did remain was eventually bulldozed and buried.

Some small pieces, however, were eventually recovered, and are preserved in the Nundle Museum.

In the past few years, one of the aircraft's propellers was recovered by the people of Nundle, and set up as a memorial to the victims. Many relatives of those who lost their lives in the crash came to Nundle to take part in the dedication ceremony. They expressed gratitude to the people who had helped bring out the bodies, and to the people of Nundle for keeping alive their memory.

(This text is courtesy of the Nundle Museum and is a part of the "Lutana" display)

ANA LUTANA

A65-17 No.33 Squadron

ANA: VH-AVL

A65-17:-C47A-45-DL.EX-SAAF:

42-24137. Call Sign – CTQ

A65-17 operated with 33 squadron from October 1943 to February 1946. Previously it was operated by ANA under control of DAT with ANA Captain and RAAF Co-Pilot and crew. ANA was the most experienced airline on Douglas A/C at the time.

A65-17 was sold to ANA 27.2.47 and became VH-ANK and VH-AVL. In September 1948 this aircraft was reported missing on a flight south. The search was conducted by 38 Sqn, under the command of OC 86 T/W WgCdr RC Rayson. A/C was located on Square Top Mountain near Quirindi, NSW.