

# BURIED SECRETS

The Canberra air disaster of 1940 killed 10 people and changed the face of politics. Now, 81 years on, a shocking twist could rewrite history

STORY **TIM CLARKE**

**O**n Pialligo Avenue – the road which runs from Canberra to Queanbeyan – there is an unexceptional brown sign, pointing into the trees.

If you were changing the radio station or taking a sip of coffee as you drove, you might well miss it. Almost an excuse for a sign, displaying just three unemotional words “Air Disaster Memorial”.

But behind those three words, and behind the fence they nudge the driver towards, is an astonishing story.

A story of war, and no peace. A story of death and politics. A story of family and flight. And the story of two men – one feted by his country’s leader, the other cast as a national villain – whose lives were intertwined forever in the moment of their deaths.

More than 80 years on from that moment, those two men – flight lieutenant Robert Hitchcock and former minister for air James Fairbairn – remain connected.

And now, revered journalist Estelle Blackburn is investigating the mystery which has followed them both into the afterlife. And whether those men might be lying in each other’s graves.

“There is no blame in this – just a search for the truth. And it is absolutely amazing that so few people in Australia know this story,” she says.

That story actually begins on April Fools’ Day, 1929, when an attempt by legendary aviator Charles Kingsford-Smith to fly around the world was halted by an emergency landing on a mudflat near the Glenelg River in WA’s unforgiving Kimberley. When news spread Kingsford-Smith was missing, two friends – Keith Anderson and Henry Smith “Bobby” Hitchcock – determined to take their tiny fixed-wing plane and find him

But all they found was their own end, when they crashed in the Tanami Desert, with no radio, axe or shovel, and not enough water.

The pair died of thirst and exposure, with Hitchcock leaving behind his wife Violet and three sons back at their small home in Victoria Park. His eldest son – Robert – was just 17.

On the day before he turned 18, with his father in mind and local MP John Curtin in his corner, young Hitchcock enlisted in the RAAF. By the age of 23, he had been accepted as an air force cadet.

And despite a rocky take-off to his life in the air, by 1939 – and with war looming – he had reached the rank of flight

lieutenant, as well as the role of husband following marriage to his sweetheart, Olive. By the following year, not only was his flying deemed more than capable, he was entrusted with training others at the challenging dual controls of the American-built Lockheed Hudson bomber. He quickly racked up more than 100 hours in the air in that cockpit, more than any other pilot in Australia.

And so, when on August 13, 1940, a flight was commissioned to take the heart of the country’s Cabinet from Melbourne to Canberra, there seemed no one better to pilot that crucial cargo than Hitchcock.

His passengers were James Fairbairn, the air and civil aviation minister; Geoffrey Street, minister for the army; Sir Henry Gullett, minister for information; and general Brudenell White, chief of the general staff – Australia’s leading general.

Lieutenant colonel Francis Thornthwaite, a staff officer to general White, and Richard Elford, Fairbairn’s private secretary, also had seats. Along with Hitchcock, his co-pilot Richard Wiesener and two other crew. »





Clockwise from left: Pilot Robert Hitchcock; the wreckage of the 1940 plane crash in Canberra; the State funeral for eight of those killed; Olive and Robert Hitchcock on their wedding day; Robert Hitchcock.



Air Disaster Memorial



## COVER STORY

There was almost another passenger. Prime minister Robert Menzies' assistant private secretary Peter Looker had reserved two seats on the flight, but Menzies – as was his preference – took the train instead.

And so, in perfect flying conditions, having already taken off and landed once that morning, the brand-new Hudson roared and then soared into the clear blue winter sky.

Just over an hour later, the aircraft was on approach to the airfield in Canberra when witnesses described seeing the left wing dip sharply, before the plane rolled over and the nose plunged downward.

A wall of flame, and a plume of smoke immediately rose above the ridge where the aircraft had come down.

David Nott was just nine, but his memories of what he saw there were still vivid nearly 80 years on.

"I could see the smoke coming over the hill. I could see the flames," he said in 2018.

"I stopped and looked down, and here was a river of molten aluminium running down the hill. You could see it running. It had ripples."

As would the personal and national impact of those 10 deaths; ripple through government, through Australia's war effort, and through generations.

The crash could almost have been seen through the windows of the parliamentary office Menzies was working in that Tuesday morning.

"This was a dreadful calamity, for my three colleagues were my close and loyal friends; each of them had a place not only in my Cabinet, but in my heart," he later wrote in his memoir.

"I shall never forget that terrible hour; I felt that for me the end of the world had come."

Many believe it was also the beginning of the end of his prime ministership. Because not only did he lose three of his most crucial wartime ministers, Menzies also lost a cabal of key political allies.

Without them, and with the by-elections their deaths brought, he was left with diminished support and a hung parliament – and a year and two weeks after the plane crashed, facing a split party and still grappling with his own grief, Menzies resigned.

Now in the midst of World War II, John Curtin was made prime minister, still the only politician from WA to ever hold that position. But before then, he had been the man who had helped Bob Hitchcock's flying career get off the ground – an

intervention he was still happy to acknowledge, despite the tragedy.

And despite the prevailing conclusion the crash was Hitchcock's fault, caused when he stalled the engine while coming into land.

"His promotion was rapid. He married, and his family were very proud of him. He, too, was proud of his father," Curtin said.

"Flying was in the blood of the Hitchcocks. Today, in Western Australia, there is a lady who lost first her husband and now her son in Australian aviation."

That woman was Olive Hitchcock, who found out her husband was dead while sitting in a hair salon chair.

And the subsequent shame which came from her dead husband being blamed and blamed again for the Canberra air disaster made her another victim. Or that is what her daughter, Kaye Green, believes.

"My mother's demise came from this. Her health went downhill," Kaye says.

"And there is a ripple effect that goes through. My brother wouldn't talk about it for years."

Kaye was born eight years after the plane came down. For the next 13 years, she saw her mother struggle intensely. Hospital. Electroconvulsive therapy. Overdoses. And finally, in July 1959, suicide. Kaye still bears the emotional scars from losing her mother so early. The scars deepened when her subsequent placement with other family led to her being sexually abused.

But the scars slowly healed, and life went on – without her mother – until 2013, when she came across an extract from a book about to be published by former Federal MP Andrew Tink.

The book detailed the Canberra air disaster, and its impact, like never before.

And it was that sorry brown sign which had literally and figuratively pointed Tink towards the tragic tale.

"I'd visited the site when I was an ANU student in the early 1970s. But I'd forgotten about it until 2010 when I happened to be driving along Pialligo Avenue," he says.

"The story is just incredible. And alarm bells began going off all the way through."

Tink, employing the legal mind which had seen him practise as a barrister before entering politics, progressively came to his own controversial conclusion.

That Robert Hitchcock was not flying that plane. James Fairbairn was.

"I cannot believe that a pilot of Hitchcock's experience would stall the aircraft. He would not have crashed that

Tracy and Marjorie Hughes, relatives of doomed pilot Robert Hitchcock. Inset: Robert Menzies places a wreath at the Canberra Air Disaster memorial.

plane – it doesn't make sense," Tink says.

And the evidence Tink pointed to was multi-layered. Hitchcock's unrivalled experience flying the Hudson. The fact he had already landed once that morning, and had also previously landed in Canberra in almost identical conditions.

There was Fairbairn's aviation obsession, having been a WWI fighter pilot hero. There was also his stated intention to fly every type of aircraft in the RAAF, including the Hudson.

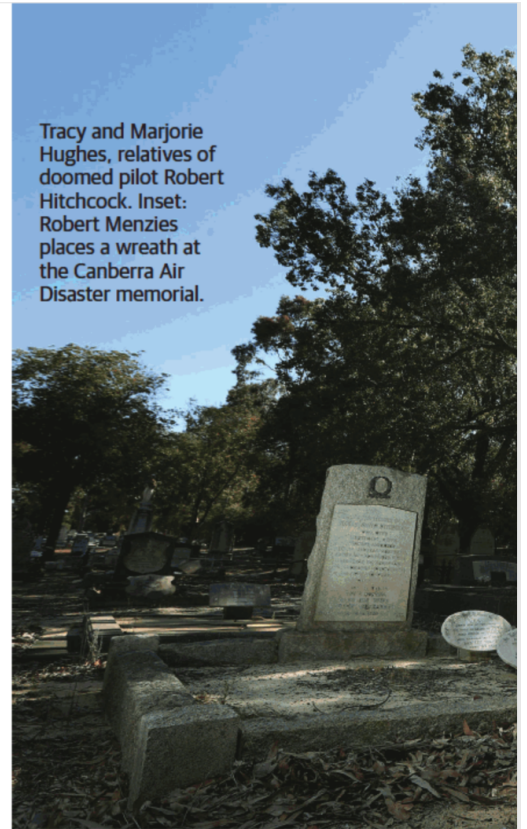
There was a conversation he had just weeks earlier with Herbert Storey, the headmaster of a school in Adelaide, detailed in a letter sent – but not considered – by the air disaster inquiry.

"I will be using a Hudson for my departmental travelling – and on every possible occasion I'll practise landings and find out more about this stalling trick," Fairbairn is said to have said.

And then there was the chaos, carnage and confusion of the crash site itself.

"I don't think there was a particular conspiracy," Tink says.

"But the wrong people were in charge of the scene. The RAAF allowed the scene to be cleared. And they allowed the bodies to be moved – and there were no photos of the bodies in situ.







┌ *If Fairbairn was wrongly identified, then could he be buried in Hitchcock's place?* ┐  
**Estelle Blackburn**

An internet search revealed the same mystery to Blackburn as it had to Tink. And so began parallel crusades – to improve access to the nationally significant site, and to finally uncover the truth as to who was flying that Hudson. Blackburn is convinced it was Fairbairn.

And she also suspects a government cover-up – a belief bolstered by the fact that of 11 files on the crash created by the Department of Air at the time, only two can now be located.

Blackburn says she is left with one inescapable question: “If Fairbairn was wrongly identified, then could he be buried in Hitchcock’s place?”

So she has convinced the descendants of Robert Hitchcock to do the unthinkable – disturb his remains, buried in Melbourne, to take some bone to test for DNA. And she has also found someone to test it against. Two someone’s in fact. Marjorie Hughes is a first cousin, once removed, of Robert Hitchcock. Her daughter Tracy obviously descends from the same maternal line. They both still live in WA. And both are willing to give a small piece of themselves to maybe help solve a generational riddle.

“Estelle doesn’t let go. And when you read the research, it sort of makes a bit of sense. It’s a possibility that this other person was flying the plane,” Tracy says.

“For us, it would be an amazing story – but probably more important for the direct descendants, the Hitchcock boys and the stepdaughter.”

That stepdaughter, Kaye Green, believes if evidence does emerge it is not Hitchcock in that grave, then a new inquiry should be launched. And she says it is not only her who deserves to know.

“I am so passionate about this story not just for our family, but that Australia acknowledges that it happened,” she says.

“Not many even know what happened, but it is political history and also aviation history.”

“It was a blunder.”

Incredibly, within two days of the crash, remains of the dead were being interred at State funerals in Melbourne. And before that, those on the scene told of the difficulty of identifying which body was which, and where they were in the wreckage.

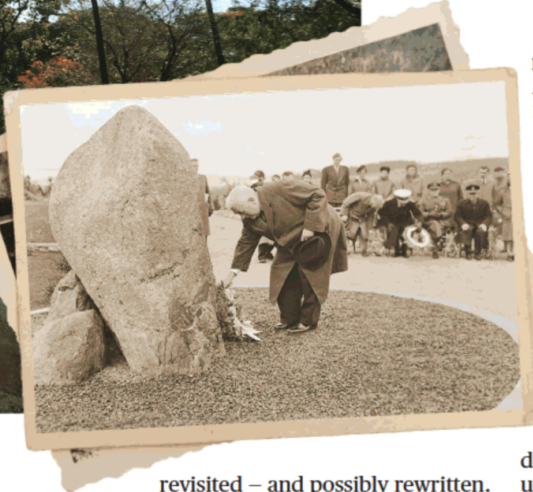
National archive records show that one of the first to that dreadful scene, group captain Douglas Wilson, was tasked with identifying the flight crew – even though he didn’t know them personally.

And by a process of elimination, he reported the two men in the cockpit had to be co-pilot Wiesener and Hitchcock – mainly because of a 10-year age difference between them.

The problem – a problem not noticed by the coroner, and not questioned for decades – was that Hitchcock was not 38, as Wilson believed. He was 28.

James Fairbairn, by contrast, was 42. “It made a really compelling case,” Tink says. “And there was never a more likely person to have taken over the controls than Fairbairn.”

When she read it, the revelation stunned Kaye Green. The history of blame and shame which had haunted her mother for years was being revived,



revisited – and possibly rewritten. “It just doesn’t add up – and I wanted to get to the bottom of it. The whole thing stinks,” Kaye says.

So she contacted Tink, who hadn’t even known she existed, and began her own journey of discovery. A journey that had also been embarked on by Blackburn. Blackburn’s tenacity had been a thorn in the side of WA’s judicial system for years, having helped resolve two of the State’s worst miscarriages of justice – proving both John Button and Darryl Beamish had been convicted of killings actually committed by Eric Edgar Cooke

But that effort had cost her dearly, personally and financially, so the journalist moved to the nation’s capital to get work away from the spotlight in WA.

In 2011, driving down Piailigo Avenue, she too saw that shabby, brown sign.

“Of course I am very nosy, so wanted to see what it meant and where it went,” Blackburn recalls. “What I found was this important place, hidden away behind a paintballing business. It was wrong that such an important memorial of such a huge event was hidden away in a pine plantation, and people were invited in by this sign and then abandoned.”