

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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NEWSLETTER

No. 117 May 2015

WARTIME MYSTERY

12 January 1945

What happened to Beaufort A9-426?

Beaufort Aircraft A9-426 Missing on Training Flight

The following information is taken from a Department of Air Minute Paper dated 13.10.45 and was written following a Court of Inquiry into the missing aircraft.

“On 12 January 1945 the Beaufort A9-426 took off from the No.1 Operational Training Unit, East Sale at approximately 2047 hours.

The purpose was to conduct a training flight from East Sale to Paynesville, Western Junction, Paynesville and back to base. The crew comprised:

*Flight Sergeant Ian Blackie;
Flight Sergeant Maurice Culhane;
Flight Sergeant David Simon, and
Flight Sergeant Roger Sullivan.*

The last contact with the aircraft was at 0020 hours on 13 January 1945 when they asked permission to change frequency and close down W/T communication. No further W/T contact was made with A9-426 although listening watches were kept by East Sale, Mallacoota and Bairnsdale.

The Court [of Inquiry], after an exhaustive enquiry, was of the opinion that the aircraft was then in the vicinity of Paynesville, and that it was lost between 0320 and 0400 hours on 13 January 1945, in



ABOVE: Beaufort A9-510/DD-S Bomber, similar to the plane which went missing on a training flight from East Sale. The Beaufort A9 was a twin-engine general reconnaissance aircraft powered by two Bristol Taurus 14 cylinder sleeve valve radial engines. Its maximum speed was 271.5mph, and range of 1,600 miles. It could carry bombs, mines, torpedoes, and was fitted with Vickers machine guns. Beauforts of this type were also converted into light transport planes.

The Beaufort A9 was a mainstay of the RAAF from 1941 to 1944 and was locally produced under licence at Fishermans Bend in Victoria and Mascot in Sydney. At peak production in 1943, almost one a day was being manufactured. A total of 700 Australia-made Beauforts were produced.

The loss of A9-426 on 12/13 January 1945 was one of 359 recorded aircraft crashes (of all types of planes) in Victoria during World War II. More Beauforts were lost through accident and mechanical failure than through enemy fire.

the Lake Corringale area south of Orbost. Unsuccessful searches by air were carried out for the missing aircraft up to 24 January 1945.

No further news of the members of the crew has been received and in view of the circumstances it is considered that they must have lost their lives."

On 16 November 1945, a recommendation was made that the members of the crew be officially presumed to have lost their lives on 13 January 1945.

Further correspondence reveals that the Mr H.J. Blackie, father of the pilot, made representations to the Court of Inquiry through the Hon. A McDonald MP seeking additional information into the disappearance of the aircraft and crew. In response to a letter from the MP, the following information was provided:

"Confirmation of the route outlined above was provided then at 9.53 pm the crew asked for a bearing and both Bairnsdale and Laverton sent bearings which were received and acknowledged.

At 10.56 the crew advised they had encountered radar jamming which they investigated without result. At 11.51pm the crew asked for another bearing which Bairnsdale provided at 11.54 pm which was acknowledged and repeated by the crew.

That bearing was 143 degrees T and as Mallacoota also got a bearing of 233 degrees T, a fix of the aircraft was obtained which showed the aircraft to be approximately 30 miles east of its correct track. At 12.20 am on 13 January, the crew advised they were coming into land and asked permission to change frequency and close down W/T communication. This was the last message received from the aircraft despite numerous attempts to contact it on various frequencies up to 4.20 am. As soon as the aircraft was overdue, every effort was made to trace it.

Unfortunately, a Liberator aircraft left Laverton for New Zealand at 10.42 pm on 12 January 1945 and numerous reports of this aircraft were received thus causing confusion in connection with the searches for the Beaufort.

Much evidence was received from VACC posts and local residents of districts between Bairnsdale and Mallacoota."

The names of a number of witnesses were provided in this letter along with times and the direction of travel they heard an aircraft take at this time. Of 14 reports received from witnesses on the ground, it was assumed with confidence that 11 of them applied to the Liberator heading to New

Zealand.

"The other three reports were related to the Beaufort which had been given a fix at 11.54 after their request for a bearing. This fix put the Beaufort about 40 miles south of Lake Tyers and nearly 60 miles from Orbost.

Evidence was given that when the weather permitted a thorough air search was made both inland and seaward, covering the entire area from Sale to Mallacoota. On the evening of 4 February 1945, advice was received at No 1 Operational Training Unit that a dairyman living near Newmerella heard an aircraft crash at 4.00 am on 13 January 1945. A further search was made on the morning of 5 February but with negative results."

Mr Blackie, the pilot's father, had stated that 'nothing was being done'. However in response to this statement he was provided with a list of searches conducted from 13 January to 20 January 1945 involving 45 aircraft from both Sale and Bairnsdale comprising Beauforts, Hudsons, Oxfords and Ansons. All searches were negative and subsequently suspended. Following the news received on 5 February, a further search was carried out.

Mr Blackie was also advised that the weather report given to the Beaufort crew indicated bad weather east of Bairnsdale, drizzling rain at Bairnsdale but good weather at Sale. All radio logs kept by RAAF at Bairnsdale, Mallacoota and Laverton corresponded regarding messages requested, received and acknowledged by the Beaufort crew.

The RAAF stated that the searches were conducted in accord with policy and could not be continued indefinitely. However, they also acknowledged and sympathized with Mr Blackie's desire for the searches to continue.

Mr Blackie's numerous attempts to seek information regarding the fate of the Beaufort eventually brought him to Orbost. He had made contact with a Nowa Nowa resident who had called Bairnsdale on the night of 13 January regarding an aircraft he heard flying very low overhead that he suspected was off course and in trouble due to the weather conditions.

Mr Blackie placed an advertisement in the Orbost paper offering a \$50 reward to anyone offering information that would lead to the discovery of the plane. He also wrote to the Forest officer in Orbost.

As a result of these actions, a number of local people contacted Mr Blackie to tell him an aircraft had definitely been in the area on the night in question. Mr Blackie said he interviewed 12 people from Orbost who said they heard a plane flying around in

the fog and misty rain up until 3.00 am.

At that time the lights in Orbost were turned off at 11.30 pm so no one was able to say that they had seen the plane, apart from one man who said he had seen an aircraft flying at around 100 feet up using his signal lamp.

Another stated he heard the plane in an area south of Orbost about 4.00 am.

Mr Blackie himself searched this area on foot with the assistance of local helpers such as forest gangs, sleeper cutters and saw millers.

Conclusion

The reports of aircraft flying east over Orbost and Mallacoota relate to the path of the Liberator flying to New Zealand according to RAAF records. The bad weather consisting of fog and rain and the lateness of the hour prevented anyone from visually identifying the aircraft.

The RAAF investigation concluded the aircraft had gone into the sea and all crew were officially presumed dead.

No trace of any wreckage has come to light in the area south of Orbost where many local people believed the aircraft came down.

VOLUNTEER AIR OBSERVERS CORPS

Observations from VAOC members in the Nowa Nowa to Mallacoota area provided important information on the possible location of the missing aircraft.

The VAOC, or 'aircraft spotters' was formed in January 1941 to support the RAAF in sighting and observing aircraft throughout Australia. It was disbanded in April 1946.

Volunteers were given training in aircraft recognition. They observed the direction of travel, number of engines, height, and attempted to identify the aircraft, giving this information to RAAF's regional air control posts. At its peak in 1944, there were 24,000 volunteers at 2,656 observation posts.

Although they rarely saw Japanese planes, the VAOC were very useful in tracking and saving many allied planes, but not unfortunately the Beaufort A9-426 which has never been found.

£50 REWARD
The above reward will be paid by the relatives of Flt./Sgt. Blackie for information leading to the finding of the Beaufort plane which was lost on the night of 12th January.
H. J. Blackie, Barkly Street, Ararat.

ABOVE: Snowy River Mail, 31st January 1945.
This notice was placed by the pilot's father. Mr Blackie snr. questioned the adequacy of the RAAF searches for his son's plane and came to Orbost to do his own search.

THE CREW

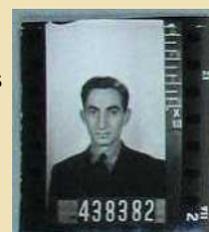
Flt. Sgt. Ian Donald BLACKIE

was born 19/6/1924 in Ararat and enlisted on 1st January 1943 age 18½ years. At the time of his death, he was not yet 21 years old and was the pilot captain of A9-426.



Flt. Sgt. Maurice Michael

CULHANE, born 20/9/1925 in Bunyip. Enlisted as air crew when 18 years old; trained as a wireless air gunner in Ballarat. Was 19 years old when he died in the crash.



Flt. Sgt. David James

Blythman SIMON, was born 12/1/1917. He joined the Army in 1940 and was based at Darwin. In 1943, he enlisted in the RAAF and was trained as a navigator. He was 28 years old when he died, the oldest member of the crew.



Flt. Sgt. Roger Edwin SULLIVAN,

was born 16/8/1925 in Launceston, Tasmania, enlisted in the RAAF in 1943 aged 17 years, trained as a wireless air gunner, died aged 19 years.



LOCAL PEOPLE WHO CLAIM TO HAVE SEEN OR HEARD THE PLANE

A storekeeper named **Hodder** at Nowa Nowa told Mr Blackie that he rang Bairnsdale at 11.55 and reported a plane flying very low. He could not see it owing to the bad night. Mr Hodder also said that the observation post at Lakes Entrance had been told early in the evening that they could go home as no planes were out.

In reply to Mr Blackie's letter the RAAF quoted reports from V.A.O.C. (Volunteer Air Observers Corps) post sightings and reports from individuals at Nowa Nowa (**Robert Hodder**); Orbost (**Nancy Tait, Annie Morgan, Roy Nettleton, Maurice Wilton**); Murrungowar (**Mary Jonson**); Bemm River (**Beatrix Morgan**); Cann River (**Patrick Reilly**); Mallacoota (**P/O Hanks and F/Sgt. Wilkins**); Club Terrace (**Edward Downey**); Gypsy Point (**Carl Sholund**); and Newmerella (**Gordon Fisher**).

Of these reports, nearly all apply to the Liberator and only the last three to the Beaufort A9-426 because at 11.54pm the fix obtained on the Beaufort showed it to be about 40 miles south of Lk Tyers and nearly 60 miles from Orbost.

Also, on the evening of 4th February, advice was received at No. 1 Operational Training Unit that a dairyman living near Newmerella, **Mr Waller**, heard an aircraft crash at 4am on the 13th January 1945. This prompted a search, but nothing was found.

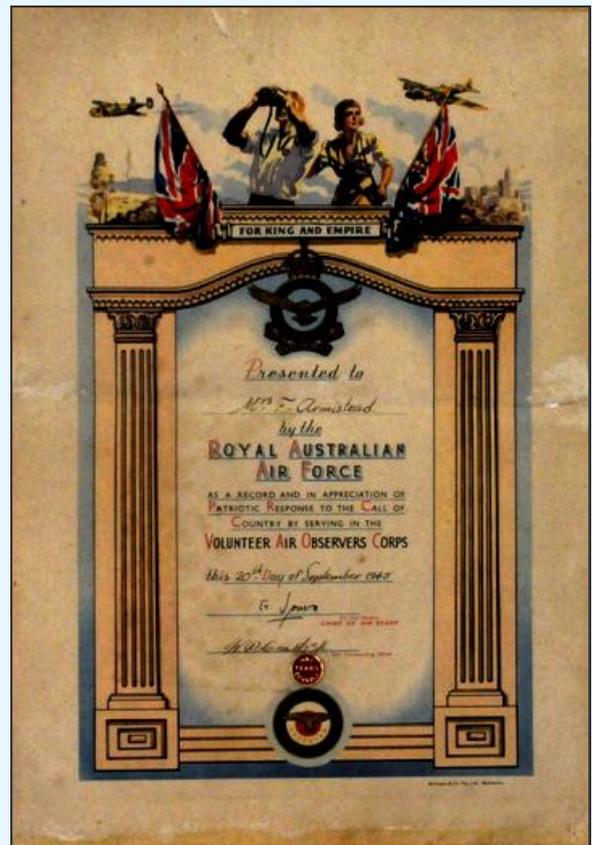
Source of information: National Archives of Australia, Series A705



ABOVE: Bob Trewin's Air Observers Corps badge. Bob was one of our local 'spotters' during World War II. He worked at night-time from an observation post located at the north east corner of the Recreation Reserve (near the present day croquet court).

In the centre of the building was a table with a large compass showing directions so that spotters could accurately describe the direction of flight. Local hairdresser, Cecil Platt, was in charge of this observation post.

Bob can remember three crashes in the Marlo area.



ABOVE: This certificate was awarded to Mrs F Armistead on 20th September 1945 in recognition of one year service for the Royal Australian Air Force as a Volunteer Air Observer.