

TRUTH & THE CANBERRA HUDSON DISASTER



Air crash August 13th, 1940: photo courtesy ABC

One of the incidents of our subjectivist age is the disposition of commentators to favour the speculative over the factual, to treat hypothesis as if it was as good as proven fact. In history, as in science, free rein is given to imagination over intellect, the tool or instrument of reason elevated to the authority of its principal.

Truth (logical truth) is the identity between what is asserted and what is. The touchstone of research is the fact: reality. One may speculate, but not at the expense of what the facts show. The theory of evolution, for instance, relies on imagination to support its claim that each natural species has developed from an earlier one, a contention which has not the slightest support in the fossil record despite more than 150 years of investigations and research. There, support for an idea has raised theory to the level of an accepted fact, for who would dare question evolutionary theory! In history hypothesis founded on some idea provides fertile ground for assertions that the determinations of earlier historians that took no account of that idea must be rejected.

This is the syndrome that underlies the drive to attribute the plane crash on August 13th, 1940, near Canberra airport (known as the Canberra Hudson disaster) to the then Australian Government Minister for the Air, Mr James Fairbairn, one of the plane's passengers, on the grounds that he was also a pilot and known to be enthusiastic about flying the Hudson bomber. The crash killed three Federal Cabinet ministers as well as Australia's most senior military officer. Conjecture based on this idea has spawned a number of books and provided newspapers with headlines their editors are loathe to have gainsaid. Speculations provide 'news'; facts are dull things in comparison.

The late Macarthur Job, in his *Air Crash Volume 2* (1992), put the blame for the crash squarely on the assigned pilot, Flight Lieutenant Robert Hitchcock, as he revealed facts that had become known since the disaster which supported the finding of the enquiry conducted by the Victorian Supreme Court's Mr Justice Lowe in 1940. The judge had rejected the suggestion that anyone other than Hitchcock was piloting the plane.

Robert was the eldest of three sons of the late Henry Hitchcock, the ground engineer who, with pilot Keith Anderson, died of thirst in early 1929 when their plane, the *Kookaburra*, a Westland Widgeon, suffered engine problems in the Tanami Desert while searching for Kingsford Smith's *Southern Cross*. Great public sympathy, expressed at the time over the deaths of the two, was reflected in a government undertaking to Hitchcock's widow to ensure employment for her boys when they reached maturity.

That Robert Hitchcock enjoyed a high-level of patronage to permit him to enter and to be trained as a pilot in the RAAF is a fact, as was his indifferent training record and the concerns expressed about his abilities by teachers such as Flight Lieutenant Wilfred Compagnoni:

"After spending quite a while with him I realized that he would not make a pilot. It would have taken many hours and patience to make him even reasonably safe in an aeroplane. I went to my flight commander... and suggested that his training be terminated. Cole (the station commander) told us that there was a direction that Hitchcock was to be taught to fly. Evidently it was a political decision. The Minister had directed that we were to persist with him."

The background to this patronage is set forth by RAAF historian, Chris Coulthard-Clark, in his book detailing the history of the Royal Australian Air Force from 1921 to 1939, *The Third Brother* (Allen & Unwin, 1991).

In February 2020 the Flight Safety Australia website featured an article entitled *One Fell Swoop: the Canberra Hudson disaster* by Robert Wilson which promoted the views of historian Cameron Hazlehurst in his *Ten Journeys to Cameron's Farm* (ANU Press, 2013) and former NSW state politician Andrew Tink in his *Air Disaster Canberra* (UNSW Press, 2013). Each indulged in the conjecture that Fairbairn was in the cockpit of the plane.

Hazlehurst did not hide Hitchcock's problems during training. He explored his subsequent progress as a pilot and found it adequate. He revealed a young man profiting from experience in the air but lacking in self-confidence, one who was known to make mistakes on occasions, as when he got his Avro Anson tangled in the trailing radio aerial of the aircraft of his senior officer.

Based on the report of a conversation between Fairbairn and Herbert Storey two weeks prior to the crash in which Fairbairn told of his enthusiasm to fly the Hudson, Tink claimed that Fairbairn was flying the plane at the time. In the absence of evidence, a statement of intention is no guide to what subsequently happened. In giving more weight to Storey's report than to the facts, Tink did the very opposite of what he claimed to be doing, "follow(ing) the evidence"; he elevated conjecture above the evidence. Hazlehurst contended that Fairbairn was in the cockpit and that he may have disturbed the pilot by his conduct. This was even less satisfactory—conjecture built on conjecture.

If there is one aspect of flying that demands a pilot's full attention it is the phase that begins at the end of the downwind leg in preparation for landing. Even if, for the sake of argument Hazlehurst's hypothesis be accepted, it is derogatory of Fairbairn's own competence as a pilot of far greater experience than Hitchcock, as well as of his integrity, to assert he was "chattering away, wanting to have things explained and distracting the pilot" at this critical phase, especially when Fairbairn had been made aware, as Minister for the Air and Civil Aviation,

of the Hudson's fragility approaching the stall. He knew from personal experience of the need for adequate speed and engine power in an aeroplane preparing to land; knew also the perils of any but shallow turns on approach, especially in a fully laden aircraft with a high wing loading.

There is one very good reason why Fairbairn would *not* have taken it upon himself to replace the co-pilot in the cockpit on this flight. He was not among subordinates or inferiors but among his superiors and his peers. With Brudenell White, Street and Thornthwaite, he had served in the Great War of whose history Gullett, an Australian Official Correspondent, had been a chronicler. Brudenell White and Thornthwaite had been decorated during the War. Brudenell White and Gullett were knights of the realm. Brudenell White was Chief of the General Staff, Thornthwaite his right hand man. Street was a fellow member of the Government (Minister for the Army) as was Gullett, Vice-President of the Executive Council. It was out of place for Fairbairn to conduct himself in such company in a manner they might interpret as his 'putting on side'.

And if conjecture is to be admitted to explain why three bodies were found in the cockpit of the burned out aeroplane, there is a much better explanation than those offered. Alone among the passengers Fairbairn was a pilot and sensitive to an aeroplane's behaviour in the air. The RAAF's Circular on the accident, adverting to the experience of people familiar with the behaviour of Hudsons based at the field and of their cousins, the twin engine Douglas airliners, emphasized that "numerous witnesses... practically everyone, stated that the aircraft appeared to be flying slower than usual" (Hazlehurst p. 568). It ought be admitted as a possibility then that, late on base leg, Fairbairn became conscious the Hudson was flying far too slowly, left his seat hurriedly and went forward to urge the pilot to increase speed to prevent the stall, but too late.

The circumstance of greatest significance concerning the accident is contained in a report by another pilot of the Squadron, far more senior in years and flying experience to Hitchcock, an airline pilot pre-war. Job writes that a few days before the crash this pilot had accompanied Hitchcock on a coastal reconnaissance in a Hudson, was appalled at the speed at which Hitchcock was making his turns on approach, and told him the aircraft was getting much too slow. Hitchcock brushed the advice aside telling the senior pilot: 'Don't panic—it's all right'. According to Job this pilot, "a well-known and distinguished Australian", had requested that his name not be quoted. Hazlehurst discovered that the pilot was Fl. Lt. William Raymond Garrett, later Sir Raymond Garrett, who died in 1994. Hazlehurst could find no record in their log books of Garrett ever having flown with Hitchcock in a Hudson though he had flown with him alone in an Anson from Point Cook to Laverton some 44 days prior to the crash. Despite these discrepancies it is clear Garrett recalled an event which accords with the evidence of the way the Hudson's pilot was flying the plane prior to the crash.

Hazlehurst recorded another episode which, though third hand hearsay, tended to confirm this evidence. It came from Jo Gullett, son of Sir Henry, as related to him by Group Captain Dixie Chapman long afterwards. Chapman claimed he had conducted Hitchcock's annual flight assessment not long before the fatal flight and had failed him because, on two successive occasions, Hitchcock had not maintained adequate flying speed on approach to landing. (Hazlehurst, p. 657)

Any objective observer would prefer the views, grounded in facts and supported by this anecdotal evidence, expressed by Mr Justice Lowe, by Job and Coulthard-Clark to those, grounded in conjecture, of Tink and Hazlehurst. The views of the former group receive support in the opinion of Murray Tyrrell, Fairbairn's Assistant Private Secretary, who had described the assertion that Fairbairn was flying the plane at the time of the crash as "absolute baloney!" In the course of his testimony to the enquiry he had said:

"I flew with Fairbairn not once but repeatedly in at least three different types of aircraft... I used to navigate for him in his private aircraft... Fairbairn was the most cautious of pilots... I've known him to take over with the permission of the pilot of the other aircraft he and I had flown in but he never took off and never landed..."

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More recently, in the *Australian* newspaper ('Tragic Wartime Crash Secret Can Finally Be Revealed', *Australian*, 12.08.2020), Michael Wooldridge, a friend of children of two of the men who died in the crash, claimed to have knowledge conveyed to him via the late Sir Harry White (Australia's first national librarian) in his old age, that the then Prime Minister's private secretary, Norman Tritton, had told him (White) on the day of the crash that when he attended the site he had seen Fairbairn "still strapped into the pilot's seat". On this foundation Wooldridge asserted that the investigation of the Hudson tragedy involved "the biggest cover up in Australia's political history".

There are a number of problems with the "evidence" (third-hand hearsay, again) that he provides. It is clear Wooldridge has not read Cameron Hazlehurst's monumental study. The book contradicts his narration on a number of points and provides evidence of facts that render White's assertions unlikely in the extreme.

Tritton was not the only one who had visited the crashed plane. Hazlehurst says that Street's secretary (Percy Hayter) and Murray Tyrell, were reportedly driven to the site with Tritton to identify the victims. (p. 406) Not long after this, Hazlehurst says, Tyrell remarked on the uncertainty of being able to identify *any* of the bodies from the crash, and so informed Tritton. (p. 408) It was Menzies who insisted that the bodies must be identified. How was it possible on these facts for Tritton to have recognised the body of Fairbairn allegedly "strapped in the pilot's seat when he arrived at the scene"? Having explored the evidence exhaustively, the best conclusion at which Hazlehurst can arrive is that there were three bodies in the cockpit area but there was no certainty as to whose they were.

If we assume for the sake of argument what Tritton is alleged to have told Harry White, that Fairbairn was in the pilot's seat (the left hand seat) at the time of the crash, this would be sufficient to prove that he was *not* the pilot in command during the landing. Why? Because Fairbairn had suffered a severe injury to his right arm when he was shot down in February 1917 (Hazlehurst, p. 315) which prevented him using his right hand on the throttles, the management of which is critical in any landing approach. For this reason Fairbairn always piloted any plane *he* was flying from the right hand seat. If we persevere with Wooldridge's

unlikely hypothesis, then, it was the pilot in the co-pilot's seat who conducted the landing approach, the aircraft's assigned pilot, Flight Lieutenant Bob Hitchcock.

No matter how far it may be pursued, conjecture never ceases to be anything but conjecture. Our knowledge of the circumstances of this signal tragedy in Australia's history may be limited but the evidence of the facts ought not to be submerged in speculation.

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