

Canberra Air disaster, 1940

During World War II the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) recorded hundreds of air crashes, in operational, training and transport flights. On 13 August 1940 one particular accident had wide-reaching effects for Australia and its allies. On that day a Lockheed Hudson crashed into a hill near the Canberra aerodrome. The crew and all six passengers lost their lives. The passengers included three Federal Ministers and the Chief of the General Staff.

The National Archives holds a range of records relating to this accident, often referred to as the Canberra air disaster. The major items are listed in the table that follows.

Attorney-General's Department

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|---|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Air Force Court of Inquiry to investigate the accident</u> | 1939–40 | A432, 1940/729 |
| <u>Coronial Inquiry, aircraft accident near Canberra</u> | 1940–41 | A432, 1940/764 |
| <u>Inquest into the deaths</u> | 1940 | A6079, MO 625 |

Australian Federal Police [Commonwealth Police]

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Aeroplane crash at Canberra on 13 August 1940</u> | 1940–41 | A1378, P8903 |

Department of Air

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|---|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Air Force Court of Inquiry into accident Hudson A16-97</u> | 1940 | A705, 32/10/2729 |
| <u>Court of Inquiry re accident to Hudson Aircraft A16-97</u> | 1940–59 | A705, 32/10/2733 |

Department of the Army

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|---------------------|
| <u>War Pension benefit for families of late General Sir CBB White and late Colonel F Thornthwaite</u> | 1940–41 | MP508/1, 66/701/27 |
| <u>Funeral arrangements – air accident Canberra, involving Ministers, Military officers and others on 13 August 1940</u> | 1940 | MP508/1, 76/701/78 |

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| <u>Funerals of Federal Ministers and Army officers – air accident, Canberra 13 August 1940</u> | 1940 | MP508/1, 76/701/80 |
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Deputy Crown Solicitor's Office, Victoria

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|---|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Air Court of Inquiry into accident</u> | 1940–42 | MP401/1, CL12774 |

Prime Minister's Department

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Inquiry into air disaster at Canberra</u> | 1940 | A461, AN314/1/1 |
| <u>Air tragedy at Canberra – General representations</u> | 1940 | A461, AM314/1/1 |
| <u>Air accident involving deaths of Commonwealth Ministers and others. Messages of sympathy</u> | 1940 | A461, 700/1/391 |
| <u>Air accident involving deaths of Commonwealth Ministers and others. Funeral and memorial services</u> | 1940–41 | A461, 700/1/392 |

War Cabinet Secretariat

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Compensation to Mrs Elford</u> | 1942 | A2676, 2172 |

Findings of the Court of Inquiry

The Court of Inquiry into the accident found that it was most likely due to the aircraft stalling on its landing approach, resulting in loss of control at a height too low to recover. The aircraft crashed with considerable force, killing all occupants instantly, then burning fiercely. Its proximity to the aerodrome and RAAF base enabled emergency crews to be at the scene within minutes, but nothing could be done to save the occupants.

The casualties

Geoffrey Austin Street, Minister for the Army and Repatriation. A World War I veteran who had been awarded the Military Cross, Street entered Federal Parliament in 1934 and became Minister for Defence in 1938. With the onset of World War II, Street's portfolio was split, and he became Minister for the Army. He gained Repatriation in 1940.

James Valentine Fairbairn, Minister for Air and Civil Aviation. A pastoralist and accomplished aviator who served with the Royal Flying Corps during World War I, Fairbairn was elected to Federal Parliament in 1933 and became Minister for Civil Aviation and Vice-President of the Executive Council in 1939. He was appointed Minister for Air at the onset of World War II, and regained the Civil Aviation portfolio in 1940.

Sir Henry Somer Gullett, Vice-president of the Executive Council and Minister in charge of Scientific and Industrial Research. A journalist until his enlistment in 1916, Henry Gullett

became Australia's official war correspondent for the AIF in Palestine in 1918. He was elected to Parliament in 1925, becoming Deputy Leader of the Opposition from 1929 to 1930, Minister for Trade and Customs from 1928 to 1929 and 1932 to 1933, Minister without portfolio from 1934 to 1937, Minister for External Affairs and Information from 1939 to 1940, and was appointed Vice President of the Executive Council in March 1940.

General Sir Cyril Brudenell Bingham White, Chief of the General Staff. With a background of service with Australian forces in South Africa in 1902–03, White served as Chief of Staff to Generals Bridges and Birdwood during World War I. He became Chief of the General Staff in 1920 and, in 1923, was appointed the first chairman of the Public Service Board. White returned to the Army as Chief of the General Staff in 1940.

Lieutenant Colonel Francis Thornthwaite, Staff Officer to General White. An officer in the Australian Army from 1910, Thornthwaite was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross for his service during World War I. He was serving as Army Liaison Officer on the General Staff at the time of his death.

Richard Edwin Elford. Elford, who had a good knowledge of aeronautics, was Private Secretary to Mr Fairbairn.

RAAF crew:

- Flight Lieutenant Richard Edward Hitchcock
- Pilot Officer Richard Frederick Wiesener
- Corporal John Frederick Palmer
- Aircraftman Charles Joseph Crosdale

The political consequences

On 14 August 1940, Prime Minister Menzies shuffled his Ministry to redistribute the vacant portfolios among current serving Ministers. The portfolios of Army and Repatriation went to Senator Philip McBride, Air and Civil Aviation to Arthur Fadden, and Vice President of the Executive Council and the portfolio of Scientific and Industrial Research to Senator Herbert Collett.

On 28 October, with his government returned following the September general election, Menzies announced a further re-shuffle which saw former Prime Minister Earle Page appointed Minister for Commerce, Harold Holt, who had resigned as Minister for Supply and Development at the onset of World War II to join the 2nd AIF, return as Minister for Labour and National Service, and Arthur Fadden, soon to become Leader of the Country Party, promoted to Treasurer. When Menzies resigned in August 1941, Fadden replaced him as Prime Minister until October, when a change of government, brought about by a successful no-confidence motion on the floor of the House, saw the Australian Labor Party under John Curtin come to power.