



'A SHOCKING CALAMITY':

THE CANBERRA AIR CRASH,
13 AUGUST 1940

Like a long-ignored piece of garden sculpture, the twisted propeller blade lay undisturbed in Sir Roland Wilson's backyard for years. But the quiet resting place belied the object's dramatic provenance.

When Sir Roland donated the object to the NMA in 1990 he explained to Museum curators that this was no ordinary aircraft propeller. It belonged to a RAAF Hudson bomber that crashed near Canberra airport on 13 August 1940, killing all on board.

Among the distinguished passengers who perished were three senior members of Cabinet: Sir Henry Somer Gullett, Vice-President of the Executive Council and Minister for Information; Brigadier Geoffrey Street, Minister for Army; and James Fairbairn, Minister for Air; and his private secretary, Richard Elford. They were accompanied by Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Thornthwaite, Army Liaison Officer, and the highly decorated Lieutenant-General Sir Cyril Brudenell White, who had achieved fame for his tactical and administrative command during the First World War.

On approach to Canberra the aircraft stalled and spiralled into a dive. Seconds before impact, the pilot regained control of the aircraft and managed to pull out of the dive. But it was too late. As the Hudson pancaked into a clearing the propellers ploughed heavily into the earth. A large log tore through the undercarriage and the aircraft burst into flames.

Those who reached the crash site first stood helplessly by, forced back by the intense heat radiating from the burning aircraft. When the fire was extinguished the grisly task of removing the bodies from the wreckage began. From here they were transferred to the Canberra morgue on Acton Peninsula.

The loss of some of the most talented and experienced politicians and military men in the country so early in the war shocked the nation. On hearing the news of the air crash Menzies told the press it was a 'shocking calamity...the full significance of which even yet is not fully realised'. The *Canberra Times* captured the dramatic and fearful mood that spread in the wake of the disaster: 'the losses come at a time when British peoples everywhere are bracing themselves to withstand the most unprincipled and desperate onslaughts'.

After an inquiry, which concluded that the crash was the result of pilot error, the aircraft was dumped at the Canberra tip. The Commissioner for Patents, Harold Wilmot, who had a keen interest in metalwork and engineering, retrieved the twisted propeller and took it home. He was interested in the duraluminum alloy used in the propeller's construction. The strong, lightweight material had revolutionised the aircraft industry in the 1930s

Indeed, many of the cuts and marks on the propeller are the result of Wilmot's backyard experiments and not of the crash. When Wilmot grew too old to use his extensive workshop he sold the contents, including the propeller, to Sir Roland Wilson, former Secretary to the Treasury and Chairman of the Commonwealth Bank.

Before putting it on display in 'Moments' on the upper level of the *Nation* Gallery, Museum staff have stabilised the corrosion-damaged propeller. David Hallam, a senior conservator with the Museum, and John Ashton, a contractor with expertise in the restoration of edged weapons, have undertaken a thorough treatment of the relic. The time spent exposed to the elements commenced a process of decay known as electro-chemical corrosion. 'Time and exposure separates the copper from the aluminium', says Hallam, 'the copper then settles on the surface and continues the cycle of corrosion'. To arrest the corrosion spreading virus-like across the surface, Hallam and Ashton decided to immerse the relic in a neutral solution of citric acid ('really a kind of orange juice', Hallam suggested) and ammonia.

The objects on display in the Museum, like people, have a past. Some quietly evoke the nation's history, while others tell a more dramatic tale. This relic from the Canberra air disaster is a reminder of a dark time in Australia's past and of a tragedy that shook the nation's confidence. 🗣️

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References: Canberra Times, 14, 15 August 1940

Top photo: Daniel Oakman and David Hallam with the propeller before its treatment 'bath'.
Photo: Dragi Markovic

'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. I SHALL NEVER FORGET THAT TERRIBLE HOUR; I FELT THAT, FOR ME, THE END OF THE WORLD HAD COME.' *R G Menzies, Afternoon Light, 1967*