

ANOTHER PIECE OF

Southern Cloud laid to rest



Photo: George Serras

Donor John Boddington, John Nadin, curator Matthew Higgins and Alan Reid junior at the handover of the *Southern Cloud* clock.

Seventy-five years after Australia experienced its first major civil aviation disaster, a piece of the crashed plane's wreckage has been donated to the National Museum of Australia. *Southern Cloud*, which disappeared in 1931 and wasn't found for twenty-seven years, has yielded another of its secrets.

The object is the clock from the aircraft's instrument panel. Donor John Boddington, a Canberra school teacher, was himself a school kid when the wreckage was found in 1958. A fellow student, Alan Reid – son of veteran political journalist Alan Reid snr – had been to the wreck site with his father soon after its discovery and souvenired the clock as well as another piece of the aircraft. John, showing an astute sense of history, bought the ruined clock from Reid jnr for five shillings.

Southern Cloud was one of five aeroplanes operated by Australian National Airways, launched by Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm in 1929 during the pioneering days of Australian aviation. The plane took off from Sydney's Mascot aerodrome on the morning of 21 March 1931, bound for Melbourne. A few hours later the weather bureau changed its forecast from 'windy and rainy weather' to a warning of virtually cyclonic conditions over the Australian Alps. But there was no way to communicate the news to *Southern Cloud* – the plane had no radio.

Piloted by experienced World War I veteran Travis Shortridge, with Charlie Dunnell at the co-pilot controls, *Southern Cloud* carried six passengers: theatre producer Clyde Hood, engineer Julian Margules, businessman Hubert Farrall, accountant Bill O'Reilly, and Elsie Glasgow and Claire Stokes who were on holiday. All were no doubt excited to be using this new form of transport which in time would so shorten Australia's vast distances. It was Claire Stokes' first plane trip.

The aircraft failed to arrive at Essendon. Co-ordinated by the Civil Aviation Branch of the Department of Defence, the search included private flyers, RAAF personal, Kingsford Smith, Ulm and other ANA pilots, and ground parties. But no sign of the missing plane could be found. The story headlined newspapers during the dark days of the Depression.

The official inquiry which followed could not determine what precisely had caused the plane's disappearance, though it concluded that the weather conditions on 21 March had played a major role. One of the inquiry's major recommendations was that radios and qualified operators be made compulsory in regular passenger services. The *Southern Cloud* crash helped create safer air travel for all Australians.

In 1958, Tom Sonter, a worker with the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, was bushwalking during his day off. He stumbled upon wreckage. Within days, DCA officials and police confirmed the wreck was *Southern Cloud*. At last there was peace for the surviving relatives and loved ones of those on board. The mystery was solved, and solved completely by accident.

One can only imagine what it was like on board the doomed aircraft in its last hours and minutes. These planes flew at much lower altitudes than today's jets and were subject to turbulence. Given the winds buffeting the plane, *Southern Cloud* would have been rocking wildly. The cabin would have been cold, given the poor insulation of planes then, and it would have been very noisy considering there were three engines, two of which were not far out from the fuselage. No doubt many – if not all – of the six passengers were airsick. Cloud would have been right down on the mountains. As the plane flew through the cloud towards the timbered flank of the Toolong Range, there might have been a momentary and terrifying glimpse as the view of the mountainside opened. And then oblivion.

In 1984 I was researching an article on *Southern Cloud* which was subsequently published in the *Canberra Historical Journal* and *Australian Aviation*. As part of this research I organised for a group of us to walk to the crash site in December. A management track (walkers only) runs nearly to the site, and from there you follow a foot-track for a few hundred metres. I was moved to find a memorial amid the remaining wreckage and surrounding eucalypts on the wild mountainside. Since then bushfires have twice burned through the area, and I have no idea of the memorial's current condition. A better-known memorial is in Sharp Street, Cooma, erected by the local Lions Club in 1962.

The ruined clock is a handful of broken metal and glass, yet it is a direct link to a key incident in Australia's aviation history, and forms a poignant and graphic reminder of the dangers of flying in the 1930s. It adds significantly to the Museum's collection of air-related objects, which range from parts to entire aircraft.

Just as the wreckage was discovered purely by chance in 1958, the Museum made contact with Alan Reid purely by chance in the lead-up to the official handover of the clock, which both Alan and John attended. This was the first time the two had seen one another since school days. And what John didn't realise when he contacted the NMA on 21 March this year, was that that day was exactly the 75th anniversary of *Southern Cloud*'s disappearance. Just a coincidence?

Matthew Higgins, Senior Curator, People and the Environment