

## **The Kyeema Disaster**

A personal account

by Anthony Abrahams

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**October 25, 2008:** This morning, I got into a rented car in a suburb in Melbourne. I took out of my bag an automobile GPS, applied its suction pad to the windscreen surface and turned it on. Almost instantly the screen informed me that the machine had found several satellites and I tapped into its memory "Ridge Road, Mount Dandenong". I had already been guided, with total precision, by an Oxford accented female voice, from Melbourne Airport to Canterbury. The same "lady" had first asked me a series of questions - whether I wished the shortest route or the quickest route, whether I minded paying a toll - my answers to which were made by the slightest touch of a finger on the screen.

Again with total precision, the lady took me to a high point on the ridge of Mount Dandenong. Sometimes she would tell me kilometres in advance whether I should hold to the right or veer to the left, which exit from the roundabout I should take. All the while my groundspeed, my ETA and other pieces of information were being renewed and printed, printed and renewed, on the screen of the GPS.

**Seventy Years Ago: Adelaide, Tuesday October 25 1938:** It is mid-morning. An Australian National Airlines DC2 bearing the name "Kyeema" is about to take off for Melbourne (having arrived from there earlier that morning) with its capacity complement of fourteen passengers and four crew. Travel by aeroplane has only just begun to gain acceptance - at least amongst those that can afford tariffs significantly higher than they are today. This and the smaller population of Australia of the time would mean that a number of the plane's passengers, from business, professional and political circles, would have a nodding acquaintance with each other.

The passengers include an exceptional politician, Charles Hawker, whose name is now carried by the South Australian federal electorate of Hawker. Having lost an eye on the Western Front during the Great War, and been wounded elsewhere to the extent that he could only walk with callipers, Hawker's "longest journey" in his own words, was when, as the youngest minister in the Lyons UAP cabinet, he crossed the floor to vote against the increase of parliamentary salaries in the Post-Depression environment of the time, thus condemning himself to ejection from the cabinet.

Hawker is seen as a potential prime minister, both by his own party and by the Curtin led opposition.

A group of wine growers is also on the plane, representatives of three families in that industry, including Thomas Hardy, the father of yachtsman Sir James Hardy.

The passengers also include a group of lawyers who are returning to Sydney from Perth where they have been representing Australia's doctors, through their client the "British" Medical Association, forerunner of the AMA, in a Royal Commission enquiring into the introduction of a National Health Scheme.

The team is led by my grandfather, barrister Leonard Abrahams KC, and includes a brilliant junior, Alfred Gain (also wounded on the Western Front) and two solicitors from the leading firm of Allen Allen and Hemsley (now Allens Arthur Robinson), an open-faced Mr James Massie and a bespectacled Mr Lancelot Shirley. Mr Shirley and his actuarial friend Gordon Goddard (also representing the BMA - and a Kyeema passenger) are prominent members of Queenscliff Surf Lifesaving Club.

One can imagine this group of fine professionals, staying overnight at a discreet club or good hotel in Adelaide, after arriving from Perth on 24 October, the Royal Commission hearings behind them and a good dinner and a few drinks their just reward. All is well.

A three-days-married honeymooning couple, a widow and two businessmen, complete the passenger list.

The advent of the all metal DC2 and the DC3 is seen at the time as a turning point in aviation transport - "powerful, superbly engineered, all metal machines whose speed, rate of climb, multi-engined safety and blind flying capacity are sufficient to cope with any contingency". According to flight safety expert (and author of "Disaster in the Dandenongs"), Macarthur Job, "the unpalatable truth is that without a corresponding technical advance in supporting ground based radio navigation aids, the sophisticated new airliners may even have been less safe for round-the-clock, all weather operations than the stout old Avro 10s of yesteryear, as the speed of the new machines could render them more lethal in the event of an accident".

Ironically, the technical advances are available but not installed; government slowness in putting them into place is already a scandal. A major air disaster is openly feared by the experts.

The Kyeema lies glinting in Adelaide sunshine. When all is ready, the passengers file out of a small departure lounge, enter in by a door set in the rear of the plane to be greeted by 27 year old "Air Hostess" Elva Jones, "trim" says Macarthur Job, "in her brass-buttoned navy blue uniform". They negotiate varying distances up the slope of the aircraft to their high-backed seats set one to each side of the aisle and Miss Jones commences handing out

the obligatory barley sugars. The plane taxis to the end of the runway, the engines are run through the usual procedures, Captain Alfred Webb releases the brakes, goes to full throttle and Kyeema is shortly afterward angling its way upwards, its propellers felting the air as it moves toward cruising altitude.

The weather conditions for most of the Kyeema flight were fine - so good in fact that the crew probably slipped into "fine weather relaxation", relying on visual sightings and perhaps delegating the log keeping to a cadet pilot acting as radio operator. Visibility was excellent at the time when the Kyeema gave a position report as "passing (the "Victorian township of) Daylesford". The problem was that they were not passing Daylesford but were over either Sunbury or Gisborne, two townships 20 miles closer to Essendon Airport.

In the Melbourne basin, the Kyeema entered into thick fog. Believing the aircraft to be twenty miles further west than it was, the pilot overflew Essendon Airport.

The rugged western slopes of Mount Dandenong are extremely steep, thickly covered by a majestic forest of tall, mostly branchless Mountain Ash, Messmates and Stringy Barks. Just after one o'clock on Tuesday 25 October 1938 the Kyeema sheered through the trees below the ridgeline and slammed into the mountain with such force that the bulk of its fuselage and wings were entirely fragmented. Our family legend is that my grandfather's gold fountain pen, bearing the initials L.S.A, was found more than one hundred yards from the point of impact. A huge blaze burned for several hours.

**A Ceremony:** The site of the accident is marked by a cairn with a plaque recording the crash and a second one bearing the names of the victims. A precipitous scramble down the slope brings you to a cross bar mounted on two posts marking the exact point of impact of the plane. Little effort of imagination is necessary; the towering trees, the unchanged slope; it is all as close as could be to seventy years ago.

When the fog comes in, syphoning and swirling up the slopes and around the trunks, you can see the two woodsmen, Logan and Murphy, who raised the alarm, peering through the thickest fog they have seen on the mountain and listening with increasing horror, as the whine of the engines becomes a roar and what is to follow becomes a certainty.

Saturday 25 October 2008 marks the seventieth anniversary of the Kyeema crash. A moving ceremony was held, attended, surprisingly, by nearly a thousand people. A number of organisations and individuals excelled themselves in the organisation, led by Mr Max Lamb and Mr Job. The smartly decked out and precisely drilled cadets of the Australian Air League beautifully performed all the honours; the Victorian Police Pipe band played the soldier songs of the time, there was a fly-over - intended to consist of two DC3s but,

due to technical problems, finally made up of one, passing over twice; and a number of people spoke, one of whom, David Hawker, a descendant of Charles Hawker was Speaker of the House of Representatives under the Howard government.

But perhaps most evocative of all was the female member of the Wurundjeri People who belong to that area, who performed the Welcome to Country. She spoke of the Land and of belonging to the Land and one gained a sense of the Land, up there on the high slopes, receiving in the dead and forever cradling their souls.

**Post Scriptum:** The Kyeema victims did not die in vain. The sound and fury after the accident finally forced the government to bring in the beam navigation system on all major routes throughout Australia, ushering in a new era in civil aviation.

In turning on the GPS to return to Melbourne, I thought of the crew of the Kyeema. An aviation version of my device, as simple as a tiny screen and a suction pad could, today, be attached to the windscreen of the aircraft. A crisp-as-starch Oxford-accented voice would instruct the pilot at every turn of the route. The lady would be there at the point of entry into fog in the Melbourne basin; she would be there when Essendon Airport was looming up. And if the pilot should display the slightest tendency to overfly the runway, the slightest inclination to head toward the Dandenongs, lights would flash, beeps would sound, and that precise voice would be heard to intone "Perform a U-Turn at the earliest possible moment".