

A2-7 Bristol Bulldog crash of weather plane from Laverton, Pilot Officer Eric Vernon Read, December 14 year not clear, found the following day in Brisbane Ranges near Bacchus Marsh. Found by Mel and Bill Vanstan and Ray Graves assisted by Pilot Officer Wiley. RAAF doctor Flight Lieutenant GreenA and also Mrs S Bird of Balliang and Mrs Alex Kerr of Bacchus Marsh.

MELBOURNE, December 14.

Pilot-Officer Eric Vernon Read, 21, and the Bristol Bulldog R.A.A.F. plane in which he took off this morning from Laverton, have disappeared. Read left on the daily weather flight at 8.15 a.m.

Flying conditions were particularly bad, and it is feared that the machine was blown off its course and has crashed in the hills. In spite of an intensive search by three flights of Air Force machines and a broadcast appeal for news of the missing plane, no information had been obtained late tonight.

It is customary for young pilots at the No. 1 Air Force depot at Laverton to obtain experience by taking turns in piloting the daily "weather plane," which climbs into the upper air where meteorological conditions are recorded. This morning it was Pilot-Officer Read's turn, and he set out to attain an altitude of 16,000 feet in difficult flying weather. At 8.15 a.m., cloud descended to between 300 feet and 400 feet, and he was quickly out of sight.

The weather flight usually occupies about 45 minutes, and when an hour had passed and he had not returned officers of the depot became anxious, though it would have been possible for the machine to have stayed aloft for two and a half to three hours.

Search Begins

A search was immediately organised by Group-Captain H. N. Wrigley, who is in command of the depot. Three flights comprising nine planes took the air to search for the missing single-seater Bristol Bulldog machine and, if possible, to guide it home, but although the search was continued until 2.30 p.m., when visibility became so bad that it was useless to proceed further, no trace of the machine was found.

On the return of the search planes, a request for information concerning the vanished machine was broadcast by all wireless stations. Numerous reports of the presence of strange planes during the morning were received, but the times suggested that they were the searching planes.

It is considered that the "weather plane" may have descended anywhere within a radius of 100 to 120 miles of Melbourne, so that, failing information of the district in which it descended, it was useless to send out ground search parties.

Visibility Poor

Poor visibility made the task of the searchers from the air practically hopeless from the outset. The clouds were so low that in the hills they were actually on the ground, making conditions particularly hazardous for a machine not fitted with radio homing equipment.

The Secretary of the Air Board (Major P. E. Coleman) said today that it was impossible to guess in which direction the plane had been blown. If the wind at an altitude of 16,000 feet was the same

as on the ground, southerly to south-westerly, the plane would have been blown inland, but there was no information available as to the direction of the wind in the upper air. It was most likely that the plane had descended among the hills where air searchers could not penetrate.

Major Coleman suggested that the plane might have descended in some remote spot where it was difficult for the pilot to establish communication with headquarters.

Young Pilot Was Born In Tasmania

HOBART, December 14.

Pilot-Officer Eric Read was a pupil of the Friends' School, Hobart, and afterwards attended the Hobart Technical College, where he won a scholarship. He was employed at the Electrolytic Zinc works at Risdon, and two years ago was selected for a cadetship with the Royal Australian Air Force at Point Cook. Last Christmas he was transferred to Laverton, and

MELBOURNE, December 15.

Alive, but with both legs broken, serious facial injuries, and suffering severely from shock Pilot Officer E. V. Read, 21, pilot of the missing weather plane, was found trapped in the cockpit of the wrecked machine on the top of a ridge in the Brisbane ranges this afternoon. He was first sighted shortly after noon by Pilot Officer J. McDonald, flying an Air Force search plane.

With the assistance of another machine, McDonald led ground parties to the plane. Read had been trapped in the plane for 31 hours, suffering extreme agony from his injuries, which included compound fractures of both legs between the ankle and knee, a fractured ankle, a fractured jaw, and a fractured nose. All of his front teeth were broken in the crash, and his left hand was severely crushed. Except for the first 20 minutes after the crash, Read was conscious for the whole of the time, and he suffered torment from thirst and mosquitoes.

Read was found by a party of farmers on a ridge 18 miles north-east of Bacchus Marsh. He was carried on an improvised stretcher four miles through terrible country before he reached an ambulance. Two women forced their way through heavy undergrowth to assist Read.

Flier Found

The first men to arrive at the wrecked plane were three farmers and a boy from Balliang. They were Mel and Bill Vanstan, Henry Saunders, and Ray Graves. They had followed compass bearings on a line given by one of the search planes, which hovered for a few minutes over Read. When they reached a ridge about three miles in from the foot of the Brisbane Ranges on the Bacchus Marsh side, they coo-eeed and received a faint answer. They battled their way through undergrowth in the direction from which the cry had sounded, and on the top of another ridge they caught the first sight of the plane. The undergrowth was so thick that they were within 30 yards of it before they saw it.

Read was lying in the cockpit of the machine, which was on its side. The upper portion of his body was hanging over the side. Read's first words to his rescuers were—"I'm O.K. But get me out of this. I want a drink of water."

The party was not carrying any water because they had not expected to find the pilot alive. They screwed the top from one of the wrecked instruments, however, and with this scooped rain-water from a dent in the fuselage, and poured it into Read's mouth.

Legs Trapped In Wreckage

Read's legs were trapped in the wreckage, and because they were both badly broken the farmers could not get him free without further injuring him. They coo-eeed to other members of the party that they had found the plane and asked them to let the base established at the foot of the hills know where they were and to bring first aid and other supplies. These arrived about half an hour afterwards.

Pilot Officer Wiley released Read by cutting through the metal and wood of the fuselage surrounding the cockpit with a hacksaw. Bushmen improvised a stretcher with saplings and their overcoats.

Two women, Mrs. Alex Kerr, of Bacchus Marsh, and Mrs. S. Bird, of Balliang, arrived about the same time as Pilot Officer Wiley with milk, water, bandages and whisky. The two women had made their way unassisted through three miles of the roughest country in Victoria. It is a series of deep ravines and sharp ridges heavily covered with thick undergrowth, which tore their hands and faces as they forced their way through it.

It was through this country for nearly four miles that Read had to be carried to receive medical attention. The

Although conscious all the time and suffering excruciating agony as the stretcher bearers slipped and staggered down the ravines, Read did not utter a cry of pain. He talked with his bearers cheerfully while Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Kerr gave him drinks and kept his head cool with wet cloths. The two women attended to him without a moment's respite throughout the whole journey, which lasted two and a half hours, even though they had been more than six hours in the search. When within a mile of the base camp the Air Force doctor, Flight-Lieutenant Green, and three medical orderlies met the party, and Flight-Lieutenant Green rendered further medical aid to make Read more comfortable. The orderlies had brought an axe which was used to clear the path for the stretcher.

Read arrived at the base camp at about 6.30 p.m. His legs were then placed in splints by Flight-Lieutenant Green, and his broken jaw, nose and other wounds were attended to before he was placed in the Air Force ambulance. The ambulance took two hours to travel the 15 miles to Bacchus Marsh, travelling through paddocks. Read reached the Caulfield Military Hospital about 10 p.m.

Graphic Story Of Experiences

Read told his rescuers a graphic story of his fight with the clouds in an attempt to get his bearings after taking off from Laverton on Monday morning at 8.15 and his subsequent experiences.

As pilot of the daily weather plane, his instructions were to fly north-east and west for five minutes in each direction at 16,000 feet, he said. He got into heavy clouds a few hundreds of feet from the ground, but he could not explain how he lost his bearings. He flew blind for 45 minutes and then came down low in an attempt to pick up a landmark.

The first object he sighted was a tree, which he struck with the wheels of his machine. He had throttled down, but opened the throttle again and zoomed over the tree. He rose 1,000 feet, but came down again in another effort to get a landmark. He came out of the clouds about 30 feet from the ground and had no chance this time of avoiding a crash.

While he was being carried in the stretcher Read described his crash through the trees. "I went straight into them," he said. "The wings were torn off and the plane hit a huge tree. I remembered no more until 20 minutes later. That was 9.12 a.m. by my watch."

The plane struck a tree, which it smashed near the base. This apparently swung the nose of the plane away from the hillside and tilted it on its side, preventing it from crashing head on. This tree probably saved Read's life.

Hours Of Waiting For Help

"When I regained consciousness," Read added, "I could not move. My legs were caught in the wreckage. I did not realise for a while that they were broken and tried to struggle free. Hours of waiting made me very thirsty, and the mosquitoes were devilish. I fixed a piece of twisted metal to a piece of stick, and scooped some water which had gathered in dents in the fabric on one of the broken wings after rain. It was hard work. The waiting for some one to come, and not knowing whether or not they would, was the worst feeling of all."

Read scratched several messages on the xylonite log pad attached to his knee and on the fuselage, using a piece of metal from the wreckage to write with. The first of these was "Crashed 0910." This message concluded with indecipherable markings.

Other messages were—"Heard Demons. Too far away to see me. 10.45 (apparently Tuesday morning). Tried to get out of cockpit; pretty hard, both legs broken. Good'oh."

"Still alive, 1700. Had lousy night. Heard Demons, 1335."

Eleven Planes In The Search

About an hour after Read had left Laverton for the weather flight on Monday morning officers at the airport had fears for his safety when he failed to return, and immediately ordered an



