

AEROPLANE TRAGEDY.

MOTH CRASHES ON FARMER.

Fatal Salute to Friends.

SYDNEY, Jan. 21.—Crashing on to cultivated land at Cornwallis, near the Richmond Aerodrome to-day, a Moth aeroplane killed a farmer, and bursting into flames, was destroyed. The pilot and mechanic escaped with abrasions, but suffered seriously from shock. The farmer was Albert Charles Smith (50), of The Terrace, Windsor. He was shockingly murdered, his head being cut off at the chin by the propeller. The pilot was Sergeant Robert Somerville (26), of the Royal Australian Air Force, who was stationed at Richmond. He was accompanied by Leading Aircraftsman Milgate, also of Richmond. This morning Mr. Smith and his son, James, left their home at Richmond for their fruit and vegetable farm at Cornwallis and were at work when the aeroplane flew over the farm. Looking up at the aeroplane, which was flying low, they recognised Sergeant Somerville, who was a friend of the Smith family, and who waved to them from the cockpit of the machine. Mr. Smith waved his hat to the airmen and the aeroplane circled round the farm. It was only about 150 feet above them when it dived towards the ground. Mr. Smith apparently did not realise that the pilot had lost control, believing that he was only stunting, and he made no effort to get out of the way until it was too late. He leaned back on a hoe he was using and watched the aeroplane. Then he realised that the aeroplane was coming to earth. He tried to jump aside, but the descent of the machine was so sudden that he was overtaken. In an instant the whirring propeller struck him on the head and decapitated him and the undercarriage of the aeroplane caught his body and dragged it along for 15 yards. The aeroplane turned over on its side and immediately burst into flames.

James Smith, the farmer's son, had been working a tractor a little distance away. He saw his father cut down and ran to the burning machine, where he found the airmen almost too stunned to escape. He dragged Sergeant Somerville from the burning wreck and then rescued Milgate, who was bleeding from cuts on the head and face. The young man then discovered the mangled remains of his father, and about three yards from the fuselage, overcome by the sight, he collapsed.

People working close by on other farms had seen the aeroplane crash and ran to the spot. The police and an ambulance were called. Although dazed and severely shaken, Sergeant Smith went to the home of the farmer who had been killed to express his grief and his sympathy and then he was taken to hospital. Milgate, who had received treatment at a farmhouse, was also taken to hospital.

In reply to inquiries by the medical officer at the Richmond Hospital, the airmen said that they did not remember anything. They both appeared to be suffering from loss of memory caused by the shock.

James Smith, in a statement later in the day, said that he was about 70 yards from his father when the aeroplane hit the ground. The aeroplane seemed to crumple up and swoop down, completely out of control.

Mr. A. E. Corder, who was working on an adjoining farm, said that he saw the aeroplane circling over Smith's farm at a low altitude. It descended and then rose to about 150 feet, then swooped with great velocity. The engine had stopped and appeared to have failed. As soon as the aeroplane hit the ground it burst into flames and was soon consumed. On many occasions aeroplanes from the Richmond aerodrome had swooped over the heads of people working on the farms there and the farmers naturally were not alarmed when a machine dived towards the ground.

When the Richmond aerodrome was notified of the accident a waggon was sent to the farm to dismantle the machine, but when the mechanics arrived the engine was almost red hot. The aluminium pipes were melted by the intense heat. The aeroplane—a Moth fitted with latest slotted wing devices—was the most modern in the aerodrome. It had been in use for only four months and was valued at £750. It was stated that when the aeroplane left the aerodrome the engine was in perfect running order, so far as could be ascertained. One theory advanced at the aerodrome as the probable cause of the accident was that the aeroplane encountered an air pocket, such as frequently occur in low altitudes in hot weather.

The accident investigation committee of the Royal Australian Air Force, it was stated, would leave Melbourne to-night and would open an inquiry at Richmond to-morrow.

Mr. Smith was a successful farmer and owned three farms at Cornwallis. He was also manager of the Nepean Products Factory and for many years was an Alderman in the Richmond Council.

A7-8 Cirrus Moth: Crash at Cornwallis, near Richmond. Albert Charles Smith, a farmer of The Terrace, Windsor, was killed when the aircraft piloted by Sergeant Robert Somerville crashed on him. Other witnesses A E Corder and the farmer's son Malcolm James Smith. Observer was Leading Aircraftman Millgate. Both airmen were injured and Somerville was committed for trial after the coroner's inquest conducted by Mr H L Johnson.

"MOTH" FALLS IN FIELD

FARMER DECAPITATED

PILOT LOSES MEMORY

SYDNEY, Monday.

Crashing in a paddock at Cornwallis, near Windsor, today a Moth aeroplane decapitated Alfred Charles Smith (46), farmer, who was peacefully ploughing. The plane fell on him and burst into flames.

The pilot, said to be named Somerville, was slightly injured. The passenger jumped clear and was not hurt. Somerville has lost his memory and is unable to state who the passenger was. The passenger left the scene immediately after the smash.

Apparently the machine met with engine trouble and had almost reached the ground when it struck Smith. The aeroplane was destroyed.

DAILY NEWS 22-1-29

AEROPLANE TRAGEDY

Inquiry Not to Be Public

SYDNEY, Jan. 22.—Robert Somerville and Leslie Milgate, the pilot and mechanic of the Moth aeroplane which crashed and killed Albert Charles Smith, a farmer, at Cornwallis, near the Richmond aerodrome yesterday, were still suffering from shock and loss of memory to-day. They are still in the Richmond Hospital. The medical officer said that the two patients showed little improvement, and it would probably be some days before they regained complete control of their faculties. Their memories have been impaired by the shock, and they cannot recall the details of the accident, or the circumstances which led up to it.

Professor Payne, chairman, and Wing-Commander Harrison, of the Air Accident Investigation Committee, reached Sydney from Melbourne to-day to inquire into the accident. They left immediately for the Richmond aerodrome, where they began a preliminary investigation, but, as the pilot and mechanic of the wrecked machine were not able to give evidence, the investigation was postponed. Professor Payne said that the inquiry would be held in camera, and that the Minister for Defence would afterwards make available to the Press any information he considered should be given out in the interests of the public.

The victim of the accident, Mr. Smith was buried quietly this morning in the churchyard cemetery at Windsor. Only a week ago Mr. Smith had expressed a wish that when he died his burial should be carried out quickly and quietly. The No. 3 Squadron, R.A.A.F., Richmond, sent a large wreath. The mourners included one of the late Mr. Smith's brothers, who was on a visit to Windsor. This is the fourth time that a bereavement has occurred in the family while he has been on holidays in Windsor, where he was born.

WEST AUSTRALIAN 23-1-29

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N.S.W. AIR TRAGEDY.

PILOT SENT FOR TRIAL.

Sensational Evidence.

SYDNEY, Feb. 4.—Remarkable evidence of low flying by airmen near the aerodrome at Richmond was given to-day at the inquest concerning the death of Albert Charles Smith, the farmer who was killed on January 21, when he was cut down by a Moth aeroplane which crashed on his farm at Cornwallis. The investigation was opened at Richmond by the District Coroner (Mr. H. L. Johnson). Mr. E. W. Street represented the pilot of the aeroplane, Sergeant Robert Somerville. Mr. R. B. Walker appeared for the relatives of the victim. The air mechanic, Leslie Milgate, who accompanied Somerville in the aeroplane, was not represented by counsel. Mr. L. C. Badham, instructed by the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor, appeared for the Defence Department.

Dr. Donovan, Government medical officer at Richmond, testified that an examination of deceased disclosed that the upper half of the skull had been cut off on a level with the eyebrows and ears. The right arm had been severed just below the elbow. There was a very severe injury over the left loin, and the upper part of the hip bone had been broken away. The wound was very extensive and contused, and apparently led into the abdomen. There were some minor bruises and abrasions.

Malcolm James Smith (18), son of the victim, said that the accident happened about 10.30 a.m. He was driving a tractor. He heard the aeroplane, then saw it turn and come towards them. His father was 30 or 40 yards from him, preparing a cauliflower bed, when the aeroplane crashed. The engine seemed to be cut off. The aeroplane burst into flames. He ran to it and saw his father, and said to Somerville: "You have killed my father." Somerville, who was in pain and still in the machine, replied: "Let me stop here." He was rescued by a Mr. Woods, but Milgate got out without aid. Somerville went over to the mutilated body and prostrated himself upon it. Somerville was a great friend of the family, and visited the home almost every night.

Dangerous Flying Alleged.

Sarah Woods, of Windsor, gave evidence that she was working in Smith's garden, and saw the aeroplane dive and pass only 10 feet above Smith's head. Smith remarked: "My word, they come pretty close, don't they?" The aeroplane rose and circled over the gardens, then swooped again, and dived into the ground. It all happened in a flash.

Thomas Henry Upton, of Windsor, gave sensational evidence. He said that he was working on Smith's farm about 60 yards from the spot where the aeroplane crashed.

Mr. Walker: Have you seen 'planes swooping down on other occasions?

Witness: Yes, I have seen them diving at the peapickers. A 'plane came down to within 12 or 15 feet over a number of men, women and children, who were picking peas. They all sat down on the ground and watched it. Other 'planes seemed to start at the pickers.

Mr. Walker: Have you seen an aeroplane fly over Smith's before?

Witness: Yes, twice.
How low did it fly?—About seven or eight feet.

Have you seen them fly low before?—Yes, over the deceased's son Malcolm. I have seen them fly two feet over his head. I have also seen aeroplanes fly 15 feet over the heads of potato diggers at Gardiner's farm.

Mr. Johnstone: Was the engine working when the 'plane hit Smith?

Witness: To my knowledge, it was.
Allan Cordner, farmer, of Cornwallis, said that the engine was making a big noise when the 'plane turned, but then it appeared to be shut off.

Coroner's Warning.

The pilot of the aeroplane, in his evidence, said: "I can remember wheeling the machine out of the hangar, but I have no recollection of the 'plane crashing or how I got to the hospital. I was using one of the latest machines supposed to be fool-proof. It had a safety device especially designed for safe flying. Presumably, I put the 'plane into a dive, but I have no recollection whether I did or not."

Dr. Arnold, Government medical officer at Windsor, gave evidence that lapses of memory after shock were not uncommon. He knew of other instances, including two in Victoria. He (witness) had suffered a loss of memory after a motoring accident.

The Coroner found that Smith died from the effects of injuries received by being knocked down by an aeroplane negligently driven or piloted by Sergeant Robert Somerville, and that Somerville feloniously slew Smith.

Somerville was committed for trial. The Coroner added: "I hope this will be a warning to all members of the Air Force never to let low flying enter their heads again. No doubt those in authority will take the necessary steps to prevent a repetition."

WEST AUSTRALIAN 5-2-29

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