

THE FORGOTTEN MAN WHO DIED 9 MAY 1927

On the 9th May 1927 Flight Officer Francis Ewen broke away from the formation flying over the area above the new Provisional Parliament House and nose dived into Cork Hill in front of the Provisional Parliament House. The fly-over was part of the formal celebrations for the opening of the Federal Parliament by the Duke of York. The following article appeared in *The Canberra Times* Friday May 13 1927. The mystery of his death has never been explained. It may have been a cover-up but it may not. What really happened we will perhaps never know. But he has been the forgotten man.



AIR TRAGEDY

Plane Crashes During Review

PILOT DIES IN HOSPITAL

Tragedy again clouded a day of celebration and rejoicing – a day that of all others should have passed free of blemish.

During the Royal review on Monday afternoon Flying Officer Francis Charles Ewen, piloting a small one man plane known as a Scout Experimenter lost control and crashed to earth.

Horrified spectators hurrying to the scene of the disaster found Ewen still alive, but terribly injured in the debris of the wrecked plane.

The tragedy occurred at about 3.20 pm and the scene was the small hill fronting Parliament House [known as Cork Hill], about three-quarters of a mile distant, and quite close to the YWCA marquee. A number of people were in the immediate vicinity at the time and as the machine came hurtling earthwards, they scattered in panic.

The crash was tremendous. A cloud of dust and a sheet of bluish flame rose in the air. The machine was a total wreck. Ewen was quickly carried to the Telopea Park School emergency hospital, but there was no hope for his recovery and he died at about 7 o'clock in the evening.

AT THE CORONER'S INQUEST

An inquest was held on Tuesday afternoon at the Canberra Hospital by the District Coroner (Mr John Gale). Dr RJW Malcolm, temporary medical officer, said that when brought to the hospital Ewen was conscious but suffering severely from shock. There were compound fractures of the right and left arms and left thigh, the ribs were fractured, and there was a large wound on the chest and lacerated wounds on other parts of the body. His death, which occurred at 7 o'clock was due to shock following his injuries.

THE VERDICT

The Coroner said that he could arrive at no other conclusion that the fall was one of those inexplicable things that happened, and could never be accounted for, even by the experts. In this case the victim, through shock from his injuries had been unable to reveal the cause of the accident, and had died taking the secret within. He found that the death was due to one aeroplane accidentally nose diving, and that nobody was to blame for its occurrence.

Arthur Poole-Lawrence Director of Medical Services, RAAF, gave a similar opinion as to the cause of death.

PLANE IN GOOD ORDER

Flight Lieut Ellis Charles Wackett RAAF, said that from the review ground he saw Ewen's machine leave the formation and fall steeply before it disappeared from his view. He afterwards examined the wreckage of the plane to ascertain if there were defects in the controls but there was nothing to show that the disaster was due to a defect. There might have been several reasons for the crash, but he could not say what was the cause. The machine was in perfect order, and had been thoroughly overhauled about a week ago. Ewen was a qualified pilot, a strong man and of sober habits.

UP 1,000 FEET

Flying Officer Sidney James Moir No 8 Squadron RAAF said that he was flying slightly above Ewen at an altitude of just over 1000 feet. They were turning into squadron formation to give the salute. Ewen's plane left the formation suddenly divided [dived?] to earth. He had no idea of the cause of the accident. If Ewen had had engine trouble he had ample room into which to right his machine.

Flying Officer Howard Howden Fletcher, also of No 3 Squadron, said that he had noticed Ewen's machine leave the formation in a stalling turn, which was continued in a further half turn to the ground. Under ordinary circumstances he had every chance to pull out. Ewen had been in the air for about two hours, and after that length of time in the air a pilot was apt to grow tired.

The Coroner: Is it true that that particular machine or any of the planes were rebuilt from those used in the Great War?

Witness: That I could not say. They have all been rebuilt, and they are overhauled regularly.

Det Sgt Thornley, Sgt Anderson and Const Robinson also gave evidence.

Flying Officer Ewen who was 28 years of age was a New Zealander and had graduated at Point Cook. He was formerly a student at RMC Duntroon.

MILITARY FUNERAL

Full military honors attended the dead airman's funeral on Wednesday morning in the old cemetery of the Church of St John the Baptist. High overhead three aeroplanes circled the cemetery and wreaths were dropped by the graveside – a final tribute from the dead man's comrades.

Marching with arms reversed, the funeral procession comprising several hundred men from each arm of the sister services was headed by the RAAF Band which played the Dead March from Saul. Officers of the Citizens Air Force acted as pall bearers. The service was conducted by the Bishop of Goulburn (Dr Radford) who was assisted by Canon Ward and the Rev WA Fletcher.

No greater loyalty, said Dr Radford, could have been displayed than the attendance of so many of the late officer's comrades.

A volley fired over the grave concluded the ceremony.

Wreaths were sent by their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of York, the Prime Minister (Mr Bruce), the Commonwealth and Dominion Governments, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the President of the Senate and the RAAF.