



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

MYSTERIES OF AVIATION De HAVILLAND DH9a – CAPTAIN STUTT AND SERGEANT DALZELL

Mysteries of Aviation: De Havilland DH9a – Captain Stutt and Sergeant Dalzell

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This mystery is not so much a mystery, but all the “firsts” and “seconds” associated with the tragic “mystery”.

The date is September 1920, before we get to the mystery, we need to set the aviation scene.

Lieutenant Arthur Long had flown from Stanley in northwest Tasmania to Victoria on 16 December 1919 to become the first airman to fly across Bass Strait. No one else had flown the strait since then.

The Australian Flying Corps (the predecessor to the RAAF which would be established the following year) operated the Central Flying School at Point Cook, to the west of Melbourne. Its main aircraft were De Havilland DH9a biplanes. These were two-seater light bombers, with a V12 water cooled engine, developed at the end of the Great War. Britain had given the planes to Australia as part of the Imperial Gift to help it establish its own air force.

Ray Parer and John Macintosh had piloted a DH9 from England, arriving on Darwin in August 1920, after 8 months with many mishaps, to be the second plane to fly from England to Australia.

The wooden Schooner “Amelia J.”, owned and operated by Henry Jones & Co (IXL Jam), had sailed from Hobart to Sydney and then onto Newcastle to collect a load of coal, before setting out for Hobart on the 21 August 1920. The schooner, with a crew of 12, was expected to take between 7 and 10 days to sail to Hobart.

Now on to our story.

By mid-September, when the “Amelia J.” had not arrived in Hobart, and no sightings had been made of her since she left Newcastle, the owners and the Tasmanian Government were very concerned about the safety of the ship and crew. Representations were made by the Premier to the Defence Department requesting a naval and air search to be conducted along the Bass Strait Islands.

After initially refusing, the Defence Department then agreed and the Commandant of the Central Flying School, Major William Horton Anderson, was requested to send two planes as part of the search. They planned to fly from Point Cook to Wilsons Promontory, then across to Flinders Island, down the East Coast of Tasmania and then on to Hobart. The following day, they planned to fly back along the same route. They would conduct an aerial search of the coastline for any signs of the Schooner or its crew.

Thus the first aerial search in Bass Strait and the coast line of Tasmania was underway.



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The Central Flying school at Point Cook had three DH9a planes in service at the time, and four pilots were available. Volunteers were called for, with Major Anderson taking one of the planes (as he was the only single man) and Captain Stutt volunteered first to take the second plane. Each pilot was accompanied by a mechanic, Sergeant Chester with Anderson and Sergeant Dalzell with Stutt. (Sergeant Dalzell was born in La Trobe).

They departed the following day, 23 September 1920, leaving Point Cook at 11.55 a.m. and stopped at Alberton in Victoria, before flying down to Wilsons Promontory, and across to Flinders Island. They flew at 15,000 feet, which gave them about 50 miles of visibility. The orders were that both planes would stay in visual contact, so if one plane was forced to land, the other could advise the authorities of their position.

Major Anderson's plane was equipped with a wireless transmitter, with Flinders Island W/T station organised to monitor for any signals from the plane. Both planes had rudimentary life vests and motor-cycle tyres for flotation in the event of a forced landing in the sea.

At Vansittart Island, near the northeast corner of Cape Barren Island, Anderson, circled lower to investigate a wreck on the beach. He reports its location by W/T, and then returned to his southerly course but could not see the other plane. (They had sighted an old wreck which was a local landmark).

The plane and Captain Stutt and Sergeant Dalzell were not seen again. Here is our Mystery.

Anderson thought it probable that they had gone ahead, so he continued on their planned route. He flew to Cape Portland on the northeast tip of Tasmania and continued down the coast to the Eddystone lighthouse. Finding no signs of any vessels in distress, he then flew inland to Brighton, just north of Hobart.

Thus, Bass Strait had been flown across for the second time by Major Anderson with Sergeant Chester, his mechanic, and the first time from North to South.

Not finding Captain Stutt at the pre-arranged landing site, Anderson telephoned the Launceston Police and informed them of the missing airplane. He requested that all coastal stations be alerted to be on the lookout for Captain Strutt, believing he would have made a successful forced landing along the coast somewhere.

Now the search has been expanded to be looking for a Schooner and a plane.

It was soon established that residents on Cape Baron Island had seen the two planes, but those on Swan Island, just to the east of Cape Portland, had only seen one plane on the 23 September.

Major Anderson later surmised that it was most likely that the other plane went to investigate a possible sighting to the east. On the day there was a strong north westerly wind blowing, creating "white horses" on the sea. They may have thought they saw a white hull of a vessel. The engine might have then failed when he was out of gliding distance to land. The prevailing wind and current, (which were north westerly), would have prevented any traces of the plane



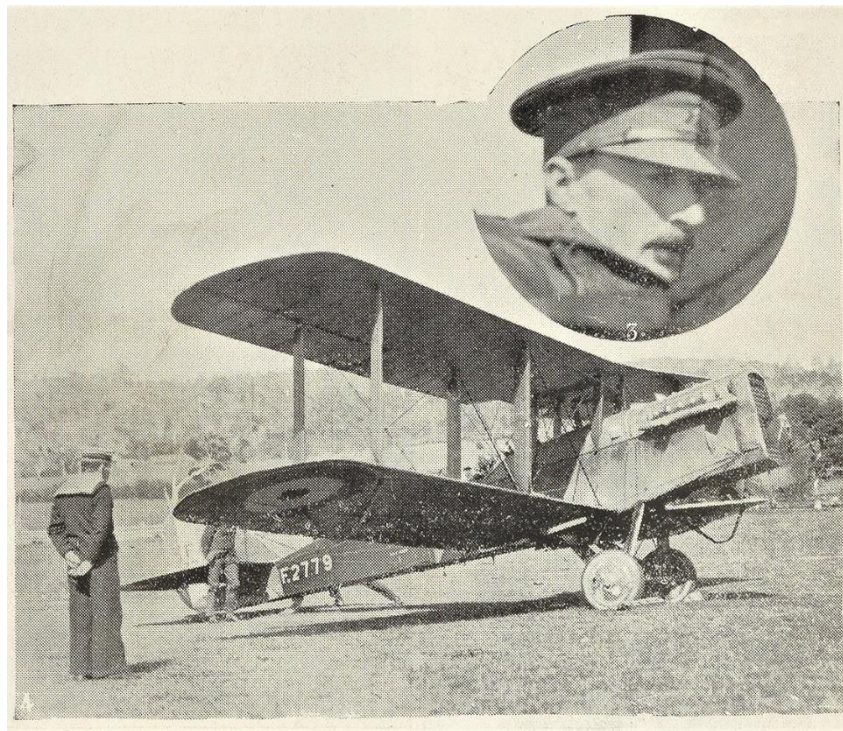
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drifting ashore. Major Anderson then flew to Launceston on the following day, using a landing strip at Trevallyn. He commenced a series of aerial searches of the Bass Strait Islands, the northeast coastline of Tasmania, and the inland area. At the same time, two navy ships searched the same coastline, and an extensive land search was also conducted. All without finding any signs of the missing schooner or plane. On the 01 October, their flight of 6 hours 15 minutes searched Gould's Country and the St Helens area. This was a new Australian record for flight duration, passing the previous record of 5 hours and 10 minutes.

After three and a half weeks, the search was called off. Major Anderson had flown between 60 and 70 hours during the search. He departed Launceston on the 17 October and returned to Point Cook, taking the same route across Flinders Island and Wilsons Promontory.

The loss of Captain Stutt and Sergeant Dalzell was the first loss of personnel from the Australian Air Corps / RAAF. To honour their memory, Stutt Street and Dalzell Road were named at Point Cook.



Major Anderson (insert) and his DH9a plane. Weekly Courier, 07 October 1920

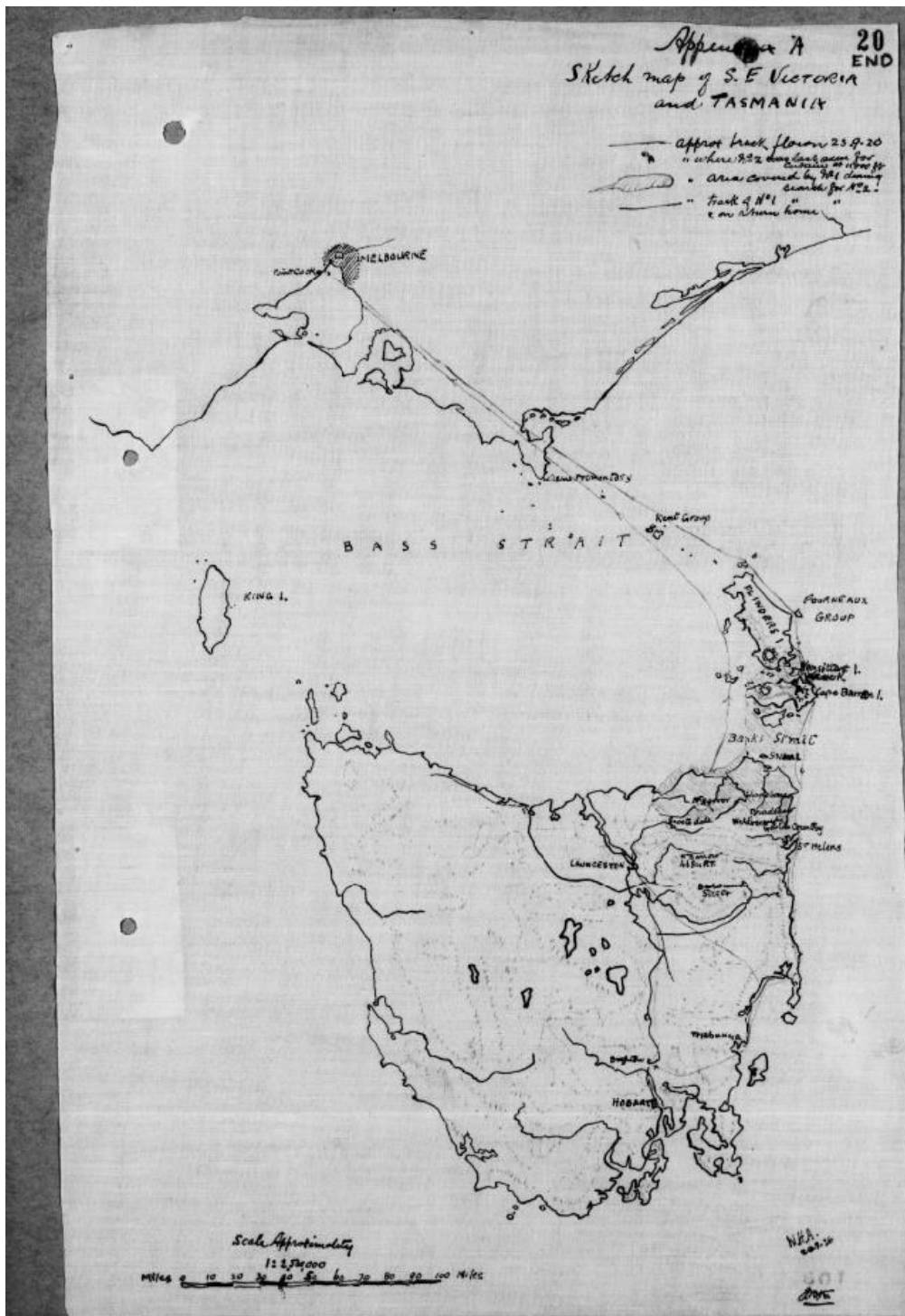
The DH9a plane used by Major Anderson, which later had the RAAF serial No A-17 was in use by the RAAF till early 1930. It was the longest serving Imperial Gift aircraft.



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Hand-drawn map of Tasmania as drawn by Major Anderson, showing the search area