



DEMONS OVER WARATAH

**Demons Over Waratah**

*Author: W. Dearing, March 2022*

It was Wednesday morning 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1937 when Ray Whyman and his patrons at Waratah's Bischoff Hotel raced outside to find the cause of the disturbance overhead.

Struggling to become visual in the low cloud, misty rain and fog that on this particular morning enveloped Waratah and the surrounding mountains, were two Hawker Demon aircraft with rapidly diminishing fuel reserves searching for a suitable landing field.



**File Photo of RAAF Hawker Demon**

The saga started on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1937, when two Demons, A1-3 and A1-8, of Number 3 Squadron RAAF left Richmond Base NSW bound for Hobart to take part in an army co-operation exercise and the Royal Hobart Regatta Day celebrations. The following morning, after spending the night at Laverton, the aircraft left in clear weather for Wynyard where they were to refuel before continuing the flight to Hobart.

The forecast was for fine weather en-route but Pilot Officers G K Buscombe and D. Ashton-Shorter soon found themselves trying to climb above low cloud and fog that stretched across Bass Strait. In addition to these conditions, they had to contend with a strong tail-wind that subsequently pushed them further south beyond Wynyard and when they briefly broke visual were shocked by not seeing Bass Strait but steep heavily wooded hills. The weather conditions



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inland worsened considerably and with fuel reserves rapidly diminishing they searched unsuccessfully for a suitable landing field near the small township of Waratah.

During this search both aircraft turned north and, in the process, lost sight of each other. Buscombe, flying A1-8 continued to climb unaware of impending disaster. In zero visibility A1-8 struck a tree, rolled violently to the left, and spiraled inverted down the opposite slope. Buscombe was able to regain control of the aircraft and with the engine smoking badly and flying down a second valley he managed to glimpse a relatively treeless area, side slipped the aircraft into a clump of small trees causing the aircraft to ground loop, hit a large tree and eventually coming to rest.



**The Wreckage of A1-8. Apparently, they were lucky to have halted at this spot as a substantial cliff lay just ahead.**

Miraculously both Buscombe and his observer, Flight Sgt Gould, escaped with only a few cuts and bruises but were now faced with the situation of not knowing where they were, having few provisions and desperately needing to seek shelter from the weather. Unbeknownst to the two airman they had crashed near Mount Cleveland some ten kilometres from Waratah in some of the most-dense country that surrounds the township.

Whilst this scene was being played out, Ashton-Shorter and his observer, Flight Sgt Slight, were also searching for a clear landing area when they spotted a gap in the fog and commenced an attempt to land. At the same time Herb Prouse on his horse and cart and Mr Stevens and his son in their truck were driving down the same road as Ashton-Shorter was attempting to land on. Somehow they missed each other with the Demon veering off the road bouncing three times before coming to rest in a paddock. The crew and the locals, although shaken, were uninjured and the two airmen were taken to the Bischoff Hotel for "recuperation".



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**The A1-3 Demon Following its "Landing" on Camp Road Wararah**

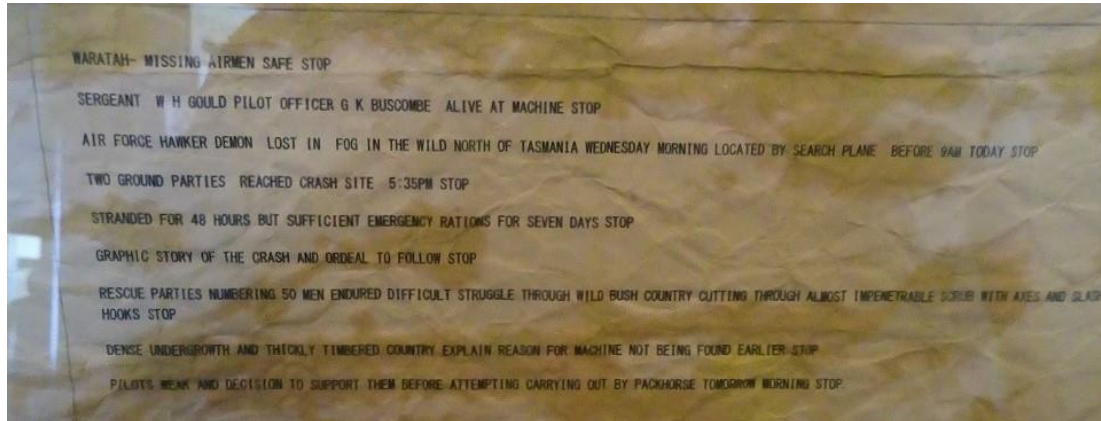
A massive search was commenced by the locals and RAAF in an effort to locate the missing aircraft A1-8. Men left the mine, school was let out and the community formed search parties within an hour but nothing was found by the end of the first day. By the end of the next day, Thursday, at least three aircraft were involved in the search but, due to the dense scrub, nothing was seen by either the aircraft or the search parties and a real fear for the safety of the crew was beginning to materialise.

At around 8am on Friday a search aircraft spotted a flare fired from the ground. The aircraft noted the position of the flare and immediately returned to Waratah dropping a hand written note to students in the schoolyard who then took the note to the headmaster.

The note instructed the search party to follow the road south of the town with the search aircraft directing them to the flare's spotted position. It was not until almost dark that the search party found the crew, cold, wet, hungry and weak after being affected by exposure to the elements, but otherwise unharmed. It was decided to camp overnight at the crash site and the airmen were brought out by pack horse the next day arriving into Waratah about 6:30pm on Saturday.



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**Telegram advising both Crews were safe and well**

The town of Waratah hosted the airmen for a over a week and on the Sunday morning a service of Thanksgiving was held in the St James Church and, as a farewell gift to the airmen, the people of Waratah organised an Air Force Ball.

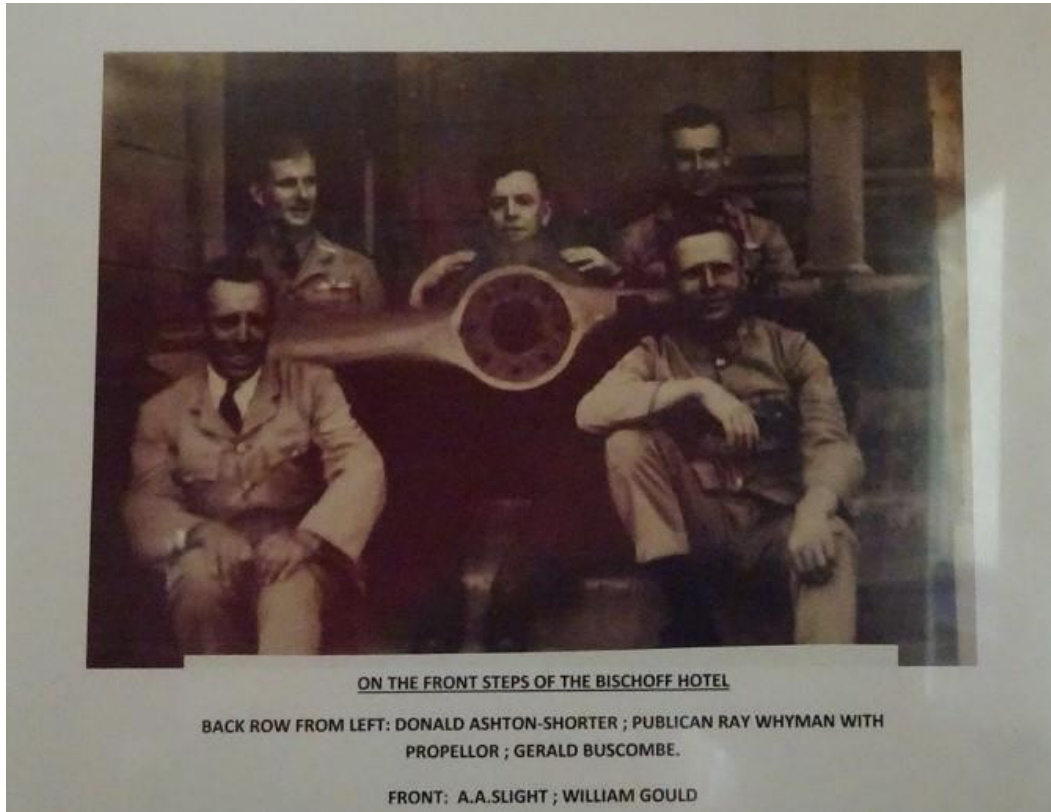
As a tribute to all involved a mosaic of the crews can be seen on the outside wall near the entrance of the Bischoff Hotel with the propellor, from Demon A1-3, taking pride of place above the entrance to the hotel's dining room.



**Prop mounted above the Hotel's Dining Room Entrance**



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**The Crews and the Publican**

However, fate and history was not finished with the pilots of the two aircraft.

Tragedy was to follow with one of the Demon's pilots. Only three months after his successful forced land at Waratah, Ashton-Shorter, the pilot of A1-3, was killed when the Hawker Demon he was demonstrating aerobatics at Townsville in suffered a structural failure whilst attempting to pull out of a dive and crashed killing him instantly.

History was not yet done with Buscombe, A1-8's, pilot. In 1977 a group of Army Reserves came across the wreckage of his Demon whilst on an exercise south of Waratah. Discussions with the RAAF followed, resulting in an Iroquois Helicopter lifting the remains of the aircraft out of the crash site where they were returned to the mainland for restoration. Fifty years to the day that Buscombe's incident occurred, the aircraft was rolled out completely restored and proudly showing off Number 3 Squadrons colours.

A member present at the unveiling was the original pilot Gerry Buscombe.



**TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated**

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**The fully restored Hawker Demon A1-8 now on display at RAAF'S Museum at Point Cook**



### A Brief History of the RAAF's Hawker Demon

Developed from the Hawker Hart bomber, to address the Royal Air Force's lack of a fast fighter aircraft, the Demon went into production in 1932. In 1934 the Australian Government ordered 18 Hawker Demon Mk 1 with some additional modifications to suit Australian conditions and powered by the new Rolls Royce 600hp Kestrel Mk V engine. Follow-on orders were placed and by late 1938 the RAAF had 64 Demons in service.

The aircraft served in seven squadrons including No 3 Squadron and proved a difficult aircraft to fly. The unreliability of the Kestrel engine made maintenance and serviceability very demanding with many aircraft spending a considerable amount of time awaiting spares and/or maintenance. There were the normal amount of crashes, mostly minor, with only ten aircraft being lost, which was as good a record as most other fighter aircraft of that period.

On the eve of World War II 54 Demons were still in service all being relegated to squadron training, communications and target towing roles. By 1948 the last of the Demons had been converted to components with no complete aircraft set aside for restoration. Fortunately, with the discovery of A1-8, that problem has been rectified with the aircraft now restored and on display at RAAF Point Cook Museum.

#### COUNTRY OR ORIGIN

United Kingdom

#### AIRCRAFT DESCRIPTION

Two-seat fighter bi-plane

#### POWERPLANT

One 560hp Rolls Royce Kestrel 12 cylinder VEE liquid cooled engine

#### SERVICE CEILING

8,382 metres (27,500 ft)

#### ENDURANCE

2.5 Hours

#### MAXIMUM SPEED

182 mph at 16,400 ft

#### ARMAMENT

Two 7.7mm (.303 inch) Vickers machine guns firing forward

One 7.7mm (.303 inch) Lewis machine gun firing aft

Light bombs could also be carried beneath the wings