



SWANSEA DEMON TRAGEDY

Swansea Demon Tragedy

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In Issue 9 of our Newsletter we detailed the story of two RAAF Hawker Demons and their crews incredible escape from two aircraft forced to make emergency landings at Waratah in 1937. This story is available [here](#).

Twelve months prior to this incident, Hawker Demon A1-3, the same aircraft that was involved in the Waratah crash landing, was involved in an incident at Swansea on Tasmania's east coast but this time with tragic results.

This particular story, as with so many others, commences in triumph but ends in tragedy.

In December 1933, 17-year-old Swansea resident Mabel Cotton completed her flying instruction at Brighton aerodrome. It took her under seven hours, as opposed to the average of nine, as reported in the "Mercury" on 6th December 1933:

In consideration of the fact that Miss Cotton had no previous instruction whatsoever and had been a passenger in an aeroplane on two previous occasions only, the accomplishment probably constitutes a record for a woman pilot.

So, it was not unusual to find her parents and younger sister, 17-year-old Jean Cotton, here at the Swansea airport to view three RAAF Hawker Demon aircraft on 6th February 1936.

The Hawker Demons had flown from Victoria to Tasmania for a training flight to attend the various air pageants and to give Air Displays at Swansea on February 6th; Hobart on the 11th; Wynyard on the 12th and Cambridge on the 15th.

The aircraft had flown from Launceston to Swansea where they landed and following lunch, they planned to return to Launceston. Around 200 spectators watched as the aircraft took to the air around 2.30 p.m. The first two planes lifted off without incident, but the third, aircraft A1-3 flown by Pilot Officer Eric Vane Lansell, failed to become airborne from the small runway in time and ploughed into a section of the crowd who were standing at the end of the runway.

Tragically Jean Cotton and her mother Louisa were both killed instantly. It was thought they had been struck by the aircraft's propellor. Several other members of the public were fortunate to escape injury by flattening themselves on the ground to avoid the aircraft. Mr Cotton was standing some distance behind his wife and daughter and was not injured.

The disabled Hawker Demon with its propellor badly damaged landed heavily a short distance later collapsing its undercarriage. Neither Pilot Officer Lansell, nor his observer Sergeant Richard James Tonks were injured.



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Pilot Officer Lansell had been a member of the RAAF for about 20 months and had over 300 hours flying experience at the time.



PILOT OFFICER E. V. LANSELL



Newspaper photo of the damage to the Hawker Demon A1-3 following the incident (Examiner 07 Feb 1936, p7)

The aircraft was guarded overnight, then it was dismantled and transported by road to Western Junction airport the following day.



Hawker Demon A3-1 being recovered following the Swansea Incident prior to transportation to Western Junction then onto Sydney to Number 2AD for repair



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At the Coronial Inquest conducted following the accident, Pilot Officer Lansell stated that he had met Jean Cotton immediately before the take-off and she had entered the cockpit:

Witness said that after lunch at Swansea he was introduced to Miss Cotton by Captain Huxley. In a conversation between the three, the remark was passed that Miss Cotton had entered the cockpit of his machine during his absence, but had left it on observing his approach, because she thought she might be doing something wrong.

Witness said he invited Miss Cotton to re-enter the cockpit, and when she did so he stood on the side and pointed out the various Instruments and told her the purpose for which they were used. "I then asked to be excused, as I had to report to Flight Lieut. Heffernan," he said. "That was the extent of my acquaintance with Miss Cotton."

He said that preparations were then made for taking off. He had taxied down to the starting-off place, following McLean's machine, but on the way he did not notice a hole in the ground that had been referred to by the other pilots. I taxied down and kept seawards of the runways of the other two machines," he said. "My direction of take-off was approximately the same as the others, but I was a little to the left."

He also described the take-off and how he could not see the people standing at the far end of the runway once the plane was moving:

He considered that the people on the aerodrome were in a safe position when he took off. His machine became air-borne shortly after he had passed the row of sags. Actually it became air-borne before he had acquired sufficient air speed. This was due to bump on the ground. "I noticed that my machine dropped a little after becoming air-borne," he said. "I lowered the nose for the purpose of picking up my air speed, thus holding the machine straight in order to get my speed as quickly as I could with a full maximum of safety. We are taught to-day that it is the general practice of service pilots." He said that when that distance in the air there was not a clear view of the ground directly in front, for it was obscured by the engine. It was a pilot's duty before he took off to see that everything was clear in front, and thereafter a view was obtained by looking out the side. On the occasion in question, he looked out on the left side until the line of sags was passed, and then he looked out from the opposite side. He thought he was three or four feet from the ground when flying level. "A fraction before the impact I attempted to climb," he said, "although at that point I would have liked a little more flying speed. When I made the attempt to ascend by easing the control column back a fraction of time seemed to elapse before the plane commenced to rise. It was only a fraction after that I felt the impact." He only felt the one impact, he said, and did not feel the tail hit the ground, unless it was instantaneous with the impact. From the moment the machine became air borne until the collision his mind was very fully occupied with the machine, He said that looking over from the right of the plane when passing the sags his mind registered a view of two people, and one in particular waving arms



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The Coroner concluded the pilot was to blame and he charged Lansell with manslaughter:

He must or should have known where the people were, and it was perfectly easy for him to have taken the same course as his predecessors. "I think the pilot was guilty of a miscalculation of the height he was above the ground," said the Coroner. "He had a duty cast on him which he did not fulfil, and I find that the deaths of Mrs. Louisa Kate Cotton and Jean Cotton were caused by their being struck by an aeroplane of which Lansell was pilot, and that the reason the aeroplane struck them was that he negligently piloted it. I consider his negligence was culpable, and it is my painful duty to commit him for trial. Lansell, who was committed to stand his trial on a charge of manslaughter at the sittings of the Criminal Court at Hobart on April 21, was granted bail in a recognisance and a surety each of £25.

The Coroner also concluded:

People should not be allowed to get in front of these machines in any circumstances. It should never have happened, and people should have been warned. The machines apparently were taken up to one end of the ground, the people at the other end, and the machines driven straight at them.

(It must be remembered that in 1936 aviation was still in its infancy, and virtually unregulated compared to today's standards).

Following the Coronial Inquiry, the Tasmanian Solicitor General stated he did not support proceeding with the trial ("Examiner" 26 March 1936):

The Solicitor General (Mr. P. L. Griffiths) stated at Launceston yesterday that as far as he was concerned the trial would not be gone on with. The Attorney General's Department, Hobart, stated that a definite decision had not been reached.

Tasmania's Attorney-General (Mr E. J. Ogilvie) reviewed the accident's finding and following an opinion expressed by the Solicitor General, he decided not to file the manslaughter indictment against Pilot Officer Lansell.

Lansing continued his career with the RAAF until 1948.

The Cotton family were highly respected and their tragic deaths deeply affected the east coast community. Following a very large funeral service, Mother and Daughter were buried at Kelvedon.

As was the case of Ashton-Shorter, the pilot of Hawker Demon A1-3 that force landed at Waratah, fate and tragedy was also not done with Swansea's Cotton family, but that's another story we will explore in the next newsletter.