



Tasmanian Aviation Tragedies - The DH.86 *Miss Hobart* Incident

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As with the development of any new industry, the early years of Tasmania's aviation industry were not without its problems and in the case of the stories to be published in this and a forthcoming newsletter, its tragedies.

This issue deals with the accidents that claimed the first DH.86 aircraft of Holyman's Airways and the lives of the crew and passengers, in particular the life of Victor Holyman who at the time was the driving force behind the fledgling airline. Although Qantas had placed orders for the DH.86, Holyman's Airways received the first one to arrive in Australia. The arrival of DH.86 (VH-URN) caused enormous excitement as this news article shows:ⁱ

The first de Havilland 86 which is to be named Miss Hobart is due at Melbourne on board the Baradine on September 10. It will be unloaded, transported to the RAAF aerodrome, Vic, where the construction will be carried out. The machine will be flown to Tasmania about September 27 or 29.

Arriving on 28 September *Miss Hobart* commenced services on the 1st of October 1934.ⁱⁱ

The Aircraft



The DH.86 was conceptually a four-engined enlargement of the successful de Havilland Dragon, but of more streamlined appearance with tapered wings and extensive use of metal fairings around struts and undercarriage. The most powerful engine made by de Havilland, the new 200 hp (149 kW) Gipsy Six, was selected. For long-range work the aircraft was to carry a single pilot in the streamlined nose, with a wireless operator behind. Maximum seating for ten passengers was provided in the long-range type; however, the short-range Holyman's aircraft were fitted with 12 passenger seats and carried the pilot and radio operator.ⁱⁱⁱ



The Crew



Victor Holman (centre) and Gilbert Jenkins (2nd from right)

Mr Gilbert Jenkins and Captain Victor Holyman, Managing Director and Chief Pilot of Holyman's Airways, piloted the airliner. Gilbert Jenkins was ex-Royal Australian Air Force and ex-Canadian Air Force, with which he had commanded a squadron. After leaving the services, Mr Jenkins had further comprehensive flying experience, commuting between the mainland and Tasmania many times with Matthews Aviation. It was only in July of that same year that he had accepted the post with Holyman's Airways Pty Ltd.^{iv}

The Passengers

Ten Tasmanians were aboard; seven men, including the Rev. Hubert. E. Warren of St Mary's township on the east coast (the father of black box inventor David Warren) and two women, one with a small child. Rev Warren was on his way to take over St Thomas' Church, Enfield, Sydney. His wife and children, deciding not to accompany him, had planned to travel to Sydney by steamer. One woman was Miss K Mercer, a well-known competitive horse rider from Campbell Town in the Midlands and one of the men was Garnet Rupert Gourlay who had served with the 1st Battalion Commonwealth Horse during the Anglo-Boer War and later with the 40th Battalion in WWI.^v



The Flight

The aircraft departed Launceston at 9 a.m. on 19 October in good flying conditions and bound for Essendon airport. Visibility was reported to be excellent and the aircraft made a routine radio call at 9:50 am some 30 miles north west of Flinders Island and a further call at 10:20 a.m. over Rodondo Island. When the 10:50 a.m. and 11:20 a.m. reports were not received and attempts to contact the aircraft by Melbourne Radio were not acknowledged, the Civil Aviation Branch and Holyman's Airways organised a search utilising aircraft and any ships that were in the area. Several days of searching proved fruitless with only an oil slick and some floating "wreckage." (which was never positively identified), was reported.

The last message was received at Laverton stating: "Over Rodondo; all's well."



Rodondo Island looking south from Wilson's Promontory

The Inquiry and Possible Causes

An official inquiry was opened in Launceston on Tuesday October 30, 1934, sparking great public interest. The inquiry went into great detail about the prevailing weather at the time and the plane's range, but there was no clear reason for the mishap.^{vi}

Following the inquiry several scenarios were presented as to what may have caused the accident:

- The aircraft may have run out of fuel and crashed when the pilots attempted to "pancake" the aircraft into the water.
- The pilots may have lost control of the aircraft when changing seats.
- Detailed weather conditions with possibility of very strong headwinds were discussed but never ascertained as a possible reason given weather conditions on departure.



None of these circumstances were positively concluded as to the cause of the accident, however, other theories tend to throw a possible different light as to the cause of the accident. Seriously lacking in directional stability, the DH.86 aircraft were frequently in trouble and following the loss of Qantas' VH-USG near Longreach four weeks later while on its delivery flight, it was found that the fin bias mechanisms of the crashed aircraft and at least one other were faulty.^{vii} Tragically a second Holyman's DH.86 aircraft, *Loina*, was also lost off Flinders Island with witnesses reporting the aircraft spun into the sea.

Although unable to present a conclusive report, investigators suggested that the fin design and adjustment mechanism was excessively sensitive. This could cause the aircraft yawing at an increasing rate, which if not corrected, could cause a potentially fatal spin.^{viii7}

What's more, to the question asked as to engine failure, the experts assured investigators there was "no way" all four of the plane's engines would have stopped working at the same time. Even if this was the case, they would argue, the plane would still have been able to maintain height long enough to make an emergency landing.

Searches would proceed along the strait, including the use of military warships and aircraft. However, not one piece of wreckage surfaced. Reports of the case at the time did mention strange aerial machines and an audible humming. One of the official transmissions from *Miss Hobart* would state that they could hear the "drone of a plane suddenly stopped" as the aircraft came towards them. This last transmission was sent around the same time the airliner is thought to have met its unfortunate end.

With no accurate and substantiated information, the inquiry handed down "strong headwinds" as the cause of the accident. Hardly a fitting decision!!

ⁱ *Launceston Examiner*, 5 September 1934

ⁱⁱ *The Hobart Mercury*, 2 October 1934, p5

ⁱⁱⁱ Wikipedia

^{iv} R A Watson

^v Ibid

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Wikipedia

^{viii} *The Forgotten Giant of Australian Aviation* by Peter Yule