

AIRSPEED OXFORD 1245

Near Maunganui November 1941



On Thursday 20 November 1941, Oxford NZ1245 went missing with a crew of two whilst on a training exercise from RNZAF Station Ohakea.

The pupil pilots flying in the aircraft, both on strength of the Advanced Training Squadron (ATS) of 3 Service Flying Training School, RNZAF Ohakea, were Leading Aircraftman (LAC) Charles William Baker, age 21, and LAC Winston Stanley Cannell, age 24. LAC Baker had 100 hours flying experience and LAC Cannell had a total of 137 hours flight time, 57 being solo and 35 having been carried out in Oxfords. The students were members of Course No. 19C.

At around 5.00 p.m. on Wednesday 19 November, both pilots had reported to Pilot Officer Selwyn Osgood Field, the ATS Navigation Officer at Ohakea, for instructions concerning their detail for the following morning. This consisted of a navigation exercise with two alternative routes. Route A: Ohakea - Opunake - Otaki - Ohakea. Route B: Ohakea - Woodville - Napier - Cape Kidnappers - Woodville - Ohakea.

On the day of the exercise, the Meteorological Office at Ohakea noted a depression in the south Tasman Sea and the lower South Island with winds over the centre of New Zealand being from the north-west and increasing in strength. The 1000-foot wind was given as 30 m.p.h. and this increased to 50 m.p.h. at 8000 feet. The ground winds were expected to get up to 40 m.p.h. at Ohakea and 60 m.p.h. near Wellington.

Cloud was forecast to be 3/10ths at 2000 feet over Ohakea, but lowering to 1000 feet near Cook Strait and in parts of Taranaki. Scattered drizzle was forecast at first in the Cook Strait area but later the weather was to become fine. The Manawatu Gorge was obscured.

These weather conditions were considered to be satisfactory to carry out the exercise and the pilots were requested to fly Route A, first in one direction and then in the other.

NZ1245 departed Ohakea at 7.35 a.m. on the first exercise, five minutes after the pilots had received the weather report. This flight was completed successfully, with LAC Baker acting as pilot, and the aircraft landed back at Ohakea at 9.56 a.m. to refuel.

During the second flight, LAC Cannell was designated as the pilot in command and LAC Baker was acting as navigator. Both men were observed getting into their aircraft with their navigation equipment by Pilot Officer John Mortimore Worden. Before leaving on this flight, the pilots checked the 10.00 a.m. weather report and, as it was considered suitable for their route, they were authorised to proceed. They were warned not to get *off* track and go near Stratford as the weather had deteriorated in that locality. NZ1245 departed at 10.45 a.m. and was due back again at 1.15 p.m.

When the aircraft failed to arrive back at Ohakea, steps were taken to ascertain whether the aircraft had landed at any other aerodrome. With enquiries being in the negative, a search

was commenced. The first search aircraft were airborne at 2.00 p.m. and searched the area around Patea, along the hills from Ashhurst to Paekakariki, and the areas around Waikanae and Rongotea. Extensive cloud was noted around the Waikanae area. Two more aircraft got airborne at 3.15 p.m. and searched until 5.00 p.m., but the weather then closed in and the search was abandoned for the day.

Bad weather on Friday 21 November, with clouds down to just 60 feet at Ohakea, prevented any searching at first light and it wasn't until 10.30 a.m. that the first aircraft got away. Four aircraft searched until 1.30 p.m., but deteriorating weather prevented further searching.

The poor weather continued on Saturday 22 November, with heavy rain and cloud down to 100 feet in places. Despite this, the majority of the route was searched except the area close to Ounake.

On Sunday 23 and Monday 24 November, weather conditions improved sufficiently to allow a more extensive search to be carried out by Oxford and Hawker Hind aircraft. No trace of the missing aircraft was found.

Mr W. P. Baker, LAC Baker's father, offered a £200 reward to anyone who could provide information that would result in the aircraft being found, but the reward remained unclaimed. During January 1942, Mr Baker expressed concern to the government that a number of training flights, including the one where his son had gone missing, were being conducted in poor weather conditions. This view, he said, was shared by a number of service personnel he met while at Ohakea. It was considered that accidents similar to that which befell LAC Baker and LAC Cannell would be less frequent as longer courses had been reintroduced at Flying Training Schools and the instructional staff were therefore able to select their flying weather with greater care.

The Court of Inquiry, which was convened to look into the disappearance of the aircraft, listened to the statements of witnesses. Several of the witnesses stated that the weather conditions at the time NZ1245 went missing were generally good for flying, with the exception of inland parts of Taranaki and the

area around Otaki. LAC Ian Sinclair McGechie, an Airman Pilot under training in course 19C at ATS Ohakea, departed Ohakea on a training flight to the south at 10.10 a.m., 35 minutes before NZ1245 departed. At 10.26 a.m., McGechie, who was flying south of Otaki at that time, decided to turn back due to poor weather conditions. He described the sky as being very black and threatening, and noted that there was a considerable drift towards the hills with an estimated westerly wind of around 40 m.p.h.

The Court concluded its inquiry with the following findings:

- 1 From the evidence available, the Court can only assume that the loss of Oxford NZ1245 is attributable mainly to the bad weather conditions prevailing in part of the route to be flown.*
- 2 The Court is of the opinion that the aircraft and equipment was in serviceable condition prior to the exercise.*
- 3 The weather conditions immediately prior to setting out on the exercise were such that the Flight Commander was justified in authorizing the flight.*
- 4 The circumstances resulting in the presumed death of NZ413804 LAC Baker C. W. and NZ413814 LAC Cannell W. S. are entirely obscure.*
- 5 The Court is satisfied that everything possible was done to locate the overdue aircraft and that all relevant reports were acted on.*

The whereabouts of NZ1245 remained a mystery for almost a year and a half. Then, on the afternoon of Saturday 10 April 1943, the aircraft was found by a Mr Sage, of Taita, Lower Hutt, on a property owned by Mr Alec Smith at Reikorangi (eleven miles inland from Waikanae). Sage and his two small sons stumbled across three pieces of material, which they considered had come from an aircraft, whilst out hunting deer. Sage, who had been in the Home Guard for two years, did not search for the rest of the aircraft due to the lateness of the day, but he did note the numbers printed on the pieces he saw and notified the Air Department by phone at 5.15 p.m. the following

day. The numbers confirmed that the aircraft was an Oxford.

On Monday 12 April 1943, the Air Department was informed that members of Mr Smith's household had found the wrecked aircraft and that a body could be seen in it.

It was clear from the evidence that NZ1245 had probably been flying in cloud at the time of the accident. The 6.00 a.m. weather observations taken at points near the crash site supported this. Otaki had overcast conditions, cloud base estimated as being at 2000 feet, visibility of two and a half miles, and a 25 mph. north-west wind. On the other side of Cook Strait, Stephens Island also had an overcast sky with cloud base at 1000 feet, a 40 mph. north-west wind and two and a half miles visibility. Mt Maunganui is 2322 feet above sea level.

The verdict reached by the Court was that "Charles William Baker and Winston Stanley Cannell died at Sec. 13, Block 1, Akatarawa S.D., on or about 20 November, 1941, from injuries received when the aircraft in which they were flying crashed on the Tararua Ranges in that locality."

The Coroner, Mr G. H. Harper, expressed his opinion that "as much honour was due to these lads as if they had been killed in action against the enemy. On joining the Air Force they knew the risks they were taking, yet they undertook their training not only willingly but cheerfully. The fact that they had reached an untimely end before they were able to meet the enemy in battle did not in the least detract from the debt of gratitude we owe them. They had made the supreme sacrifice for their country and no man could do more that

Source:

Title: Missing – Aircraft Missing in NZ 1928-2000

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Published: 2001 by Adventure Air