Twenty-eight years ago next Tuesday
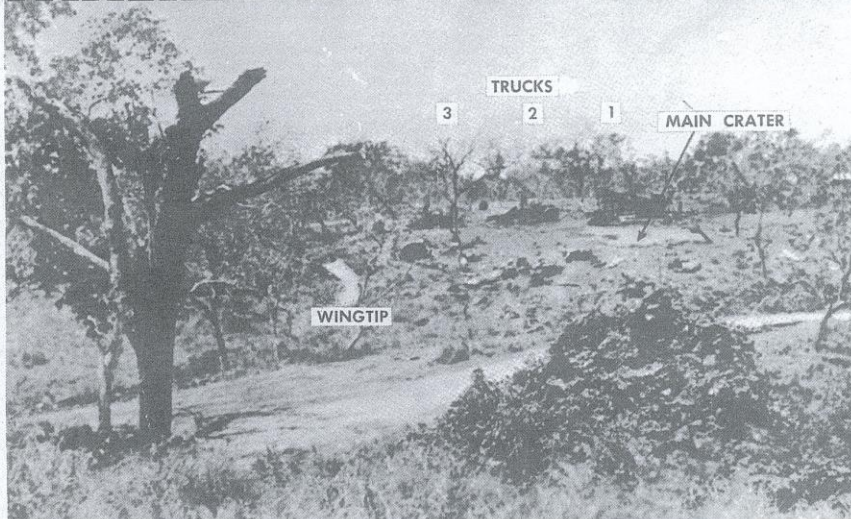## 73 men were killed and 91 injured in

AUSTRALIA'S WORST AIR DISASTER

by Derek Sligo

TRUCKS 3 2 1 MAIN CRATER

WINGTIP

Crash scene at Jackson's airfield, Port Moresby, September 1943. The Liberator hit the tree in the foreground.

Next Tuesday marks the 28th anniversary of Australia's worst, but least publicised, air disaster in which 73 men were killed and 91 injured.

The tragedy occurred in pre-dawn darkness when a loaded United States Air Force four-engine Liberator bomber crashed on take-off from Jackson's strip, Port Moresby.

It ploughed into a line of stationary trucks carrying members of the 2-33rd Australian Infantry Battalion waiting to be airlifted over the Owen Stanley Range at the start of the Markham Valley-Lae campaign.

One of the survivors, Doug Cullen, of Logan Road, Upper Mt. Gravatt, who was a company commander, said: "The crash was classified as top secret and nothing was published. I don't think that the story of the crash was told even after the war."

The crash virtually wiped out an entire infantry company. It was the most severe loss suffered by the 2-33rd Battalion throughout the whole war.

In more than five years of service, the 800-strong battalion lost 195 killed, and of these, 60 were killed in the plane disaster.

The entire American crew of 11 and two other Australians (of 158 General Transport Company) who were driving the trucks carrying the infantrymen, were also killed.

Seven of the dead and 14 of the injured were Queenslanders.

On September 7, 1943, the 2-33rd Battalion, which had been in a staging area outside Port Moresby, began at 3 a.m. to prepare to go to Jackson's and two other strips to be lifted in DC 3s (Dakota "biscuit bombers") over the Owen Stanley Range to Tsili Tsili in the Markham Valley.

The battalion, formed in England in 1940, as part of the 7th Division had already fought in the Syrian campaign and along the Kokoda trail over the Owen Stanley Range to Gona.

After reorganisation and training on the Atherton Tableland, it was back in New Guinea again.

The Battalion was to go in two airlifts, each of 18 planes. The lifts were to be made an hour apart.

At 4.20 a.m. half the battalion was in the marshalling area near the airstrips when a plane which had just taken off, roared over their heads at 100 ft.

One soldier remarked "Hell, he was close! I hope we don't stay here too long."

Five minutes later another roar started up from Jackson's.

Bill Crooks, of Harbord, Sydney, who was a sergeant at the time, has written the just-published official history of the battalion. "The Footsoldiers" (Printcraft Press).

He wrote: "Four lights of an aircraft could be seen (towards the end of the strip) and the thing kept coming. It eventually became airborne but seemed to hang just above the ground.

"We watched the bomber, its exhausts spurting sparks and flame, come on.

"Someone yelled, 'It's going to hit us' and somebody was running and screaming 'Look out! Look out!'

"The bomber came crashing through the trees, its engines roaring. The left wing sheared off and the fuselage smashed down like an arrow into the trucks.

"A great explosion rocked the area and a vast brilliant yellow flash lit up the surrounds brighter than day. For a moment only the sounds of falling parts of aircraft and other debris and the crackles of flames could be heard.

"Then almost together there broke out the screams and moans of men. In a second, all about the scene of this frightful disaster could be seen running men.

"All around the little gullies and re-entrants, petrol was aflame. The dreadful sound of agonising screams of despair seemed to drown out all else.

"Within minutes the flames had reached the ammunition carried in all the trucks and it began exploding. Men, charging about on fire, would suddenly disappear as either the grenades or two-inch mortar bombs they were carrying in their clothes or equipment, exploded.

"Others, rolling themselves on the ground to put out the flames, would suddenly jerk as their bandoliers exploded."

Crooks, who was sitting on the tailboard of a truck when the plane crashed, was smashed against a tree and left hanging 6 ft. from the ground, with his belt hooked in a branch.

The tree and his tent-roll, strapped to the back of his equipment were on fire. He undid his belt buckle and fell to the ground as someone else crashed alongside him.

They crawled under a truck, but then ran to escape flaming petrol running down the hill towards them.

Cullen who was commander of C Company, said the Liberator was carrying four 500 lb. bombs and 2800 gallons of petrol. Two of the bombs exploded on impact and a third went off later in the flames.

His company was just ahead of D Company which was almost wiped out.

"We were in 18 trucks, about 20 men to a truck, stationary nose to tail," he said. "The plane crashed on top of us, hitting five trucks. I was about four trucks ahead of where the main part crashed.

"I was pretty lucky. I had got out of the cabin to see what was the delay and was sitting on the running board.

"A propeller went right through the cabin, killing my driver. I saw a sheet of flame billowing up towards us and I dived on my face.

"The flame receded and I got up and started to put out the flames on the chaps."

Lieutenant Ray Whitfield, of Sydney, one of Cullen's platoon commanders, jumped from the cabin of a truck — and tripped over a 500 lb. bomb jammed under the front of the truck. This was the fourth one, the one that did not explode.

Among those in the back of the same truck was Lieutenant Frank McTaggart. Cullen and Whitfield found him with a great open wound in the top of his head.

"I gave him no chance and we left him propped up against a stump while we helped some others.

"But he is still very much alive, with a plate in his head. He is a grazier at Howes Valley, Singleton."

Cullen and Whitfield saw a figure come out of the flames naked and burnt, but in smouldering boots. In a quiet American drawl — he was one of the plane crew — he asked, "Sir, where shall I go?" He died as he was placed on a stretcher.

Ted Stollznow, of Sixth Avenue, Coorparoo, who is the battalion association Queensland branch secretary, was back in the camp area, preparing to join the second airlift, when the plane crashed.

He said he heard an explosion and saw a great flame lighting up the dark sky like day. Then he heard another explosion — the third bomb going off.

The airlift went on despite the tragedy. Survivors were regrouped. There were 14 from D Company (normal strength about 130).

Some, including Crooks, had to survive a second plane crash the same day.

The port engine of their DC 3 burst into flames during take-off, the pilot aborted the take-off and took the plane off the runway (so as to keep it open for following planes) into the grass where a tyre blew and a wing scraped the ground.

An Army court of inquiry under Brigadier F.O. Chilton found there was no neglect, misconduct or carelessness associated with the disaster.

Several witnesses gave evidence that one of the plane's engines was on fire before the crash, but the court said this was probably a flame from the supercharger.

It said there had been some suggestion of sabotage "but our inquiries with the U.S. Air Force personnel has not revealed any positive evidence."

The court found that the crash was due to a cause or causes unknown.

But it said that in its opinion less exposed areas could have been used for marshalling for the airlift. The one chosen was in a direct line of flight of the runway.

However, all other possible marshalling areas were being used for either stores or troops for the operation. It recommended that in future, marshalling areas be at the side of runways.

Cullen only a few days before the crash had resumed using his real name.

At the outbreak of the war he was in the Permanent Army, but at this time permanent soldiers were barred from joining the A.I.F.

So Cullen went A.W.L. from Darwin and enlisted in the A.I.F. under the name of Copp (he used the name and address of an uncle of a friend).

Back in Australia after the first New Guinea campaign he made a written confession of "fraudulent enlistment". This was accepted by the Army without imposing any penalty while the battalion was at Port Moresby, and Captain Copp became Captain Cullen. Later he was promoted to major.

Cullen, who was Mentioned in Dispatches in the Kokoda campaign, won the Military Cross and was wounded in action (for the second time) a week after the air disaster.

FOOTNOTE: The official Australian war history, The New Guinea Offences (David Dexter) puts the total killed in the crash at 70, with 92 injured. However the Army court of inquiry placed the figure at 73 killed, with 91 injured. "The Footsoldiers" backs this up by giving the names of the dead and injured.

Other Australian air disasters with heavy loss of life

Year	Plane	Place	Killed
1946	DC 3	Hobart	25
1948	Lockheed	Lea	37
1948	DC 3 (Lutana)	Quirindi (NSW)	13
1948	Lincoln (bomber)	Amberley	16
1949	Lodestar	Coolangatta	21
1949	DC 3	Guildford (WA)	18
1950	DC 4	York (WA)	28
1960	Friendship	Mackay	29
1961	Viscount	Botany Bay	15
1966	Viscount	Winton	24
1969	Viscount	Port Hedland	26