

MIDWEEK

JUNGLE GIVES UP ITS SECRET



Squadron Leader L.R. "Smokey" Dawson: served as RAAF liaison officer with the Dutch at Merauke. He was lost when the VH-RDK disappeared.

On September 7, 1944, a Dutch Dakota with 19 people aboard disappeared. Nola Bates reports on the discovery of its wreckage.

ONE OF Australia's greatest aviation mysteries was solved last month when a group of botanists accidentally stumbled on a missing Dutch transport.

The aircraft, with 19 people on board, included two Australian servicemen and two women, had disappeared on September 7, 1944, while on a regular flight between Merauke, in what is now Irian Jaya, and Cairns.

Seven members of the Australian New Zealand Scientific Exploration Society, while wet, tired and hungry, chanced on the old plane when collecting plant specimens on jungle peaks, west of Mossman, in far north Queensland.

Unsure of their discovery they quickly contacted Air Force officials in Canberra with the astounding story.

The ANZSES team leader, Gordon Baird, returned by helicopter with two RAAF investigators from Townsville and the trio were winched down through the jungle canopy to the site.

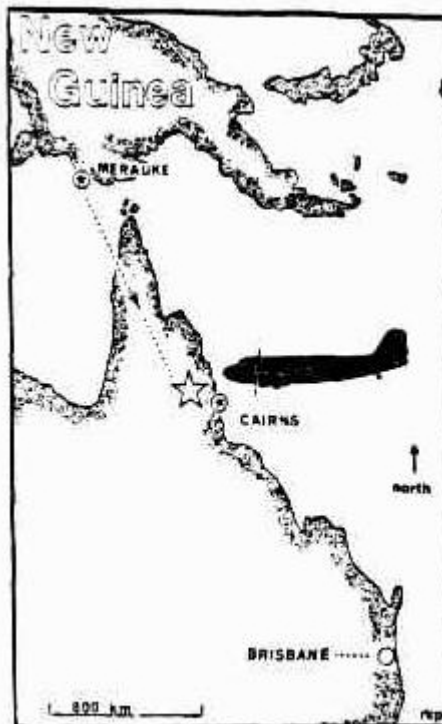
Civil registration markings VH-RDK on the tail quickly identified it as the missing Dutch Dakota DT9-41. A large section of wing, radial engines, part of the fuselage with windows, an inscribed watch from Holland and the many personal belongings scattered about also helped to confirm the find.

News of the discovery was quickly flashed to The Hague in the Netherlands and the difficult task of tracking down the next of kin began. Amazingly some were found to be living in this country.

Meanwhile, back at home, the Australian families also had to be traced. The Australian servicemen killed were Squadron Leader L. R. "Smokey" Dawson of Quirindi, NSW, a RAAF liaison officer with the Dutch in Merauke, and Lieutenant H. W. A. Armstrong, an Army officer, who had come from Perth.

Also aboard the ill-fated aircraft were seven Dutch fighter pilots, all members of

seven Dutch fighter pilots, all members of 120 Squadron flying P-40 Kittyhawks, coming back for rest and recreation leave.



Many personal souvenirs, including native artifacts and metal models of their aircraft, were found among the crash debris.

The last radio call received from the Dutch transport was at 1901 hours when the pilot radioed Cairns that he would be "landing in about 10 minutes".

There were no further transmissions though witnesses were later to report hearing it around Trinity Beach (north of Cairns), and an RAAF radar station plotted a track from the same area to 13km inland, where it was lost at 1924 hours.

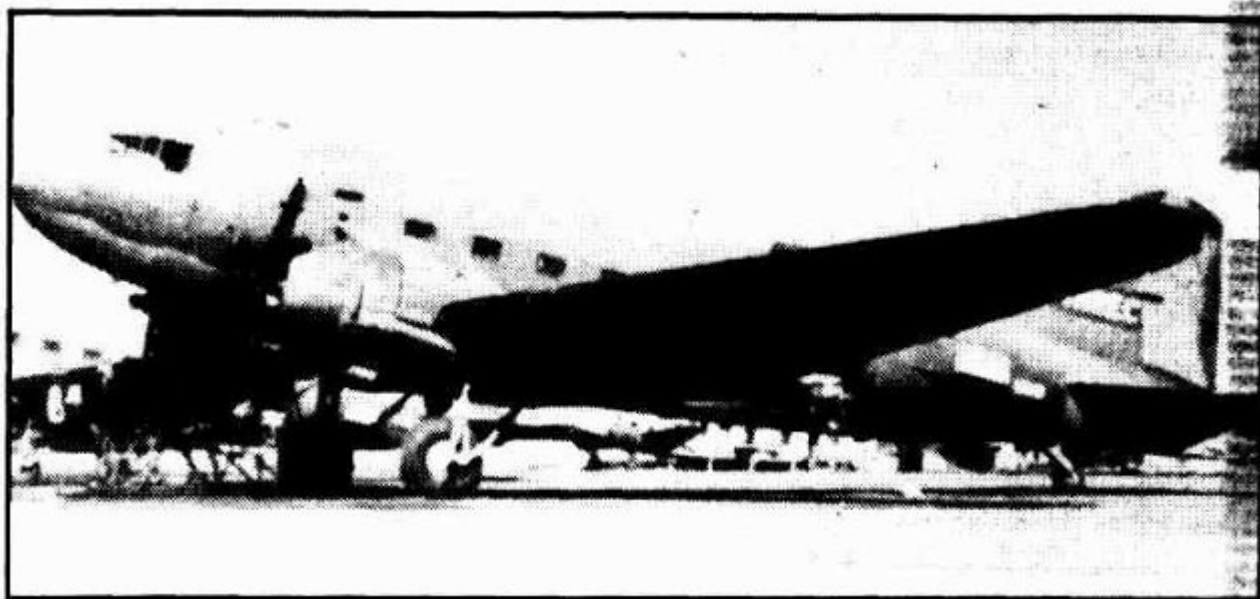
The flight from Merauke to Cairns is about 1050km and usually took about four hours. Endurance for VH-RDK on that day was seven hours and 2600 litres of fuel with the aircraft due to arrive at 1825 hours.

The weather that night at Cairns was poor with frequent showers and the sky clouded over. Accordingly the Australian duty pilot at the 'drome had suggested that the Dutch aircraft divert further south to Townsville where conditions were clear.

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To help the Dutch pilot Cairns airstrip left its flarepath and revolving beacon on and army searchlights lit the sky.

In addition the air force's Volunteer Air Observer Corps in the area was alerted by telephone. Flarepaths at Mareeba and Cooktown remained on till 11pm.



A Dutch C-47 transport plane similar to the VH-RDK recently found in north Queensland. While the mystery of the VH-RDK has been solved the fate of many other planes missing in the Mossman-Cairns area remains uncertain.

At dawn the next morning a huge search began. RAAF Avro Ansons, Beauforts, Boomerang fighters, Catalinas and a Mariner scoured the land and sea. They were supported by the Army and police as well as scores of civilians in remote areas. Meanwhile, offshore, the Navy searched the coastal waters.

Colonel Zomer, the Commanding Officer of the Royal Netherland East Indies Air Force, also flew to the area and was convinced that "owing to the rugged nature of the country and its dense cover of forests and jungle, it would be possible for searchers to fly almost directly over the missing aircraft without being able to see it".

MERAUKE was a combined Dutch, Australian and American base during World War II. In mid-1944 it was defended by No 120 Netherlands East Indies Squadron and its Kittyhawk fighters. VH-RDK was one of the regular courier aircraft that connected it with the Australian mainland.

VH-RDK had gone through similar problems the night before (September 6) with very bad weather and torrential rain. On that occasion advice had been received from the Volunteer Air Observer Corps that the transport was circling Mossman, believing it to be Cairns, and was attempt-

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The Cairns control tower then radioed the pilot, giving him his present position and a course to fly to safety. At this stage the Dutch pilot still felt that he was over the correct 'drome. Consequently the RAAF arranged for search and shore lights to be lit. VH-RDK sighted the lights and flew south, arriving with only a small supply of petrol remaining.

Members of the RAAF who visited the crash site said it had to be "walked on to be found" and that the wreckage, 200m below the ridgeline, was cold and inhabited by leeches. Parts of the camouflaged aircraft blended in with the surrounding country and rocks.

The first Air Force people to reach the site were Flying Officer Pat Kenny and Corporal Andy Clarke, his radio operator, both of No 27 Reserve Squadron at Townsville. Their helicopter pilot was Flight Lieutenant Tony Thorpe.

It is hoped that later an appropriate part of the aircraft, perhaps a propeller, can be recovered for the RAAF Museum and as a memorial to those who lost their lives.

There are quite a number of other aircraft missing in the general Mossman-Cairns area, all American. They include B-24 Liberators, B-25 Mitchells, A-20 Hav-

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ocs, C-47 transports and fighters. All had been on ferry flights up the coast or inbound from New Guinea.

One can only speculate how many others lie in the nearby ranges and jungle and might also be discovered in future years.

The finding of one usually heightens local people's awareness and stimulates the solving of yet another aviation mystery.

The list of names on board DT9-41, as released by Australian and Dutch authorities, is as follows:

Dutch personnel: First Lieutenant B. van Aken, First Lieutenant R.T. Braakensiek, First Lieutenant H.P. Levy, First Lieutenant O. Leyding, First Lieutenant R.J. Salm, First Lieutenant J.S. Zwart, Sergeant A.J. Scholte (all were fighter pilots transported south for a rest period). Crew: First Lieutenant H.J.H. Daanen (captain), Sergeant W.A. Torn (2nd pilot), Sergeant E. Kerdijk (weather/operations), Sergeant J.F. Damwijk (engineer).

Others: Second Lieutenant Lebeau; Second Lieutenant Boreboom, Sergeant Straub (Dutch military); Mr S. Jacob, Mrs Waas, Mrs Wakewau (civilian); Lieutenant H.W.H. Armstrong (Australian Army); Squadron Leader L.R. Dawson (RAAF).