

## SECOND DH86 FALLS OUT OF THE SKY KILLING ALL ON BOARD

Three members of its crew and a passenger were killed when the second of the de Havilland DH86 aircraft to come from England, for the QANTAS Singapore-Brisbane section of the Australian London air mail, crashed on 15 November 1934, about six miles south of Ilfracombe QLD. The victims were:

Captain R A Prendergast, of Imperial Airways, pilot.

Mr J A Broadfoot, Shell Company's aviation attendant at Mascot Aerodrome, Sydney.

First Officer W V Creetes, of Imperial Airways, co-pilot and wireless operator.

Flight Officer F R Charlton, of Imperial Airways, flight engineer.



### The Crash

The DH86 VH-USG, which crashed seven minutes after it had left Longreach for Brisbane, on the last stage of its flight from England, appeared to go into a spin at an altitude of about 1,000 feet and struck the ground with considerable force. All the four occupants were killed instantly with the exception of the engineer, who died a few moments after he had been extricated from the wreckage.

### Investigations and Inquiry

The aircraft was similar to VH-URN *Miss Hobart*, which was lost with occupants and mail while crossing Bass Strait on 19 October 1934, except that it had dual instead of single controls. The Acting Prime Minister (Dr Page) announced in the House of Representatives that a full enquiry into the causes of the accident would be held immediately. Qantas Empire Airways notified the Government that, pending the enquiry, it would not employ any aircraft of a similar type which it has acquired for the Australia-Singapore service. The managing director of QANTAS (Mr Hudson Fysh) stated that the service, which was scheduled to be inaugurated by HRH. the Duke of Gloucester at Brisbane on 10 December, would not be commenced until the Commonwealth Government and the QANTAS were fully satisfied as to the safety of the DH86 aircraft. *The good name of the machine, he said, may easily be cleared and in that case no delay may be necessary in starting the service.*

A preliminary investigation which was begun at the scene of the crash disclosed that at the time of the disaster the plane was being piloted by the co-pilot, the body of the chief pilot, with that of Mr Broadfoot, the passenger, being found in the cabin. The man in the wireless operator's seat had a log book in his hand. One victim was lying partly out of the cabin, and the other three were in the wireless operator's cabin. The ill-fated DH86 left Longreach at 05:40 on Thursday 15 November, and seven minutes later had crashed on Barsdale Station, a few miles from Ilfracombe QLD.

The site of the crash was a few yards from a dry watercourse. About 100 yards away was a cleared space which could have been used as an emergency landing ground, and there was speculation at the time that the pilot was making for this spot when the machine crashed. [Subsequently this theory was discounted; the aircraft was out of control during the descent].

*The roar of the plane woke me as it passed overhead* said Arch Rogers, a kangaroo shooter, who was first to reach the scene of the crash. He watched the aircraft for a second or two, and it then seemed to begin a spiral descent. Rogers watched with interest as it disappeared from sight. A second or so later he heard a terrific crash and saw a great cloud of dust or smoke rise. He rushed to the scene and saw the big plane a mass of wreckage. It was obvious to him that some of the men in the machine were dead, but one of them, whom he found afterwards was Charlton, appeared still to be alive, and Rogers assisted to pull him out of the wreckage. He was alive but unconscious, and a moment or two later he was dead. Rogers said it was a terrible shock to him, seeing the big liner skimming along the sky like a bird one minute, and becoming a mass of wreckage with all its occupants dead a few seconds later. It was a beautiful clear morning, the best locally for many days.



Mr J Barr, of Barsdale Station, on whose property the crash occurred, stated that the machine was in a spin almost from the time he sighted it. Mr. Barr had risen when he heard the drone of a plane, and his attention was drawn when the noise of the motor became a roar. He looked up and saw the plane flying at about 1,000 feet. It began to spin, and continued until it bit the earth, with a sickening crash, which he distinctly heard, though he was about three and a half miles away. He immediately telephoned QANTAS at Longreach that there had been a crash, and then went by car to the scene. He was there within a few minutes, but even then he was too late, for all the occupants were beyond human aid. The machine was just a twisted mass of wreckage, and the pilot and others were horribly mutilated.

The fact that the chief pilot, Captain Prendergast, was not in control at the time of the crash was thought at the time to be an important discovery made in the preliminary investigation. This information was known by the Air Accidents Investigation Committee which determined the cause of the accident.

The bodies were removed about noon, and police guarded the wreckage until the arrival by air from Brisbane of Captain Lester Brain and the Civil Aviation Department officer at about 18:00. Mr J Murphy, postmaster at Ilfracombe, reported that the plane appeared to be in difficulties when it was passing over Barrsdale, and the pilot turned it in the direction of Longreach. Another eyewitness said that the pilot stopped the engine just before the aircraft struck the ground. The airspeed indicator had stopped at 160 mph. Although everything in the DH86 was broken to pieces a triangular piece of glass about 18in. in length which appeared to have been portion of a window, was lying 15 yards in front of the wreckage undamaged. One man reported that trouble appeared to develop in two engines on one wing, and caused the machine to spin. The engines of the aircraft were not buried in the ground. A pancake-like landing had been made.

### **The DH86 Accidents**

The DH86 was the third of its type to reach Queensland. Captain Lester J Brain flew the first machine from England, and the second was carried to Australia on the steamer *Bendigo*, and that machine was being assembled at Archerfield Aerodrome, Brisbane at the time of the VH-USG accident. The aircraft that crashed was being brought by what was described as a *delivery staff*, as it was not intended that the two pilots and the engineer should fly the DH86 on its trip to Singapore in the following month. All were staff members of Imperial Airways, and each was regarded as a first-class

employee. The fourth DH86 was already on its way to Australia by sea, and the fifth was to be flown from England in December.

The late Geoff Goodall accurately summarised the situation about the accidents on his website:

*The civil career of the DH86 in Australia was marked by a series of accidents which attracted sensational newspaper and newsreel theatre coverage. Australian accident investigation reported in-flight instability and structural weaknesses in the tailplane, which led to type groundings and modifications. The Australian Civil Aviation Branch's actions were strongly disputed by the manufacturer and derided by the British Ministry, which in retrospect would appear to have put the prestige of the British aviation industry ahead of safety concerns.*

*The story of DH86 airworthiness is long and complex. Its reputation was tarnished from the beginning when Holyman's Airways' first DH86 VH-URN disappeared in the sea between Tasmania and Melbourne in October 1934 only a fortnight after entering service. A month later QEA's newest DH86 VH-USG spun in out of a clear blue sky in western Queensland on its delivery flight from England, killing the experienced British crew. As the accidents continued, the Australian Civil Aviation Branch faced the dilemma of attempting to investigate each crash without specialised investigators, issuing grounding orders and ordering mandatory checks and modifications of the tailplane, while fighting a public battle with the airlines, who wanted the public to be reassured, and De Havilland Pty Ltd, Sydney who were worried about loss of further sales - in addition to outright hostility from the parent de Havilland company and the British Government of the day, both intent on protecting British aviation prestige. Subsequent investigation has revealed that British type certification and testing was minimal and reports exposing weakness in the tailplane structure were suppressed.*

Seriously lacking in directional stability, the DH86s were frequently in trouble. On 19 October 1934 Holyman's DH86 VH-URN *Miss Hobart*, Launceston TAS for Melbourne with mail and passengers, was lost in Bass Strait with no survivors. Flotsam that may have been wreckage from the aircraft was seen from the air three days later, but surface ships failed to locate it in rough seas; the aircraft had effectively vanished. At the time *Miss Hobart* disappeared the design of the aircraft was not suspect, and it was thought that an accident may have occurred when Captain Jenkins and the wireless operator/assistant pilot Victor Holyman (one of the proprietors of Holyman Airways) were swapping seats in mid-flight.

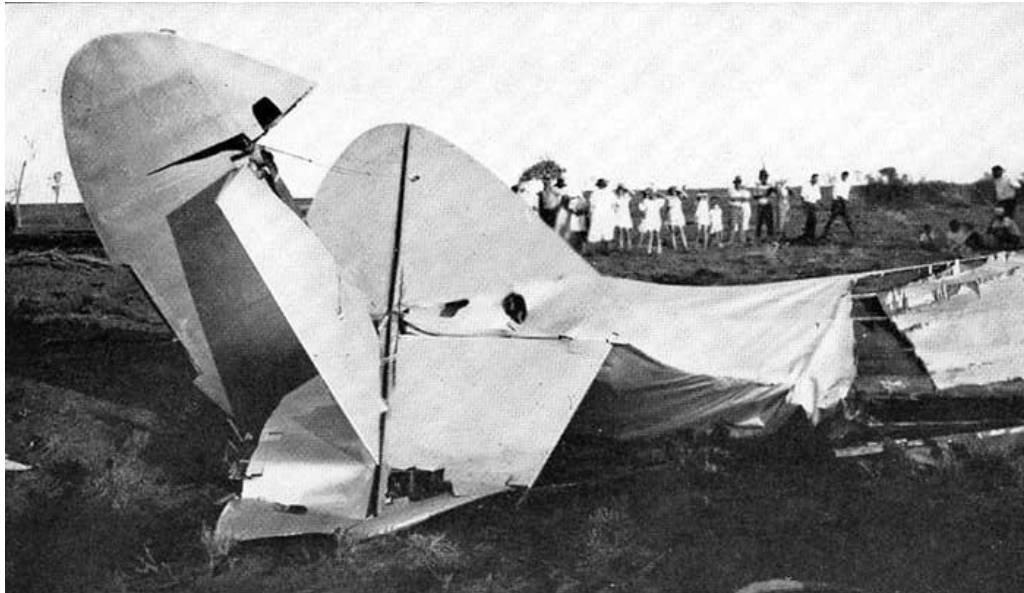


Wreckage of Qantas DH86 VH-USG (c/n 2311) displayed in the Qantas Founders Museum, Longreach QLD. This is all that remains of the sixty-two DH86 aircraft that were built

However, following the loss of QANTAS' VH-USG near Longreach QLD 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 component, were faulty, although it is doubtful that this had any direct bearing on the accidents

other than perhaps adding to the aircraft's lack of inherent stability. Further investigation revealed that VH-USG had been loaded with a spare engine in the rear of the cabin, and that one of the crew members was in the lavatory in the extreme aft of the cabin when control was lost. It was theorised that the aft centre of gravity condition that thus existed resulted in a loss-of-control at an altitude insufficient for recovery (the aircraft was at an estimated height of 1,000 ft prior to the crash).

It was a big aircraft for its power, and as a result very lightly built. There was poor response to control movements in certain speed ranges, the wings were inclined to twist badly if the ailerons were used coarsely and, most seriously, the vertical tail surface was of inadequate area. The result was an aircraft that, although quite safe under normal conditions, could rapidly get out of control under certain flight regimes.



The forward fin attachment had clearly failed. It was established this was not due to the impact  
Photo: Qantas

Lester Brain, Senior QANTAS Captain, wrote a report to General Manager Hudson Fysh after test flying the first QANTAS DH86 VH-USC in England, following his initial flights in the prototype single pilot cockpit DH86 G-ACPL *Delphinus*. He immediately identified a basic design flaw: *"The glide float, and takeoff and landing characteristics are much the same as on the prototype Delphinus. The fitting of flaps is essential for continued operations and is urged. The dual cockpit is a vast improvement over the prototype and must be considered satisfactory."* QANTAS installed flaps to their DH.86s at their Brisbane hangar, and by June 1935 all had been modified.

In addition, the DH86 was prone to violent ground-loops in the hands of even the most experienced pilots when engine power was lost on either side during takeoff or landing. These ground-loops caused major damage to most Australian DH86s, except the DH86Bs of Carpenter Airlines

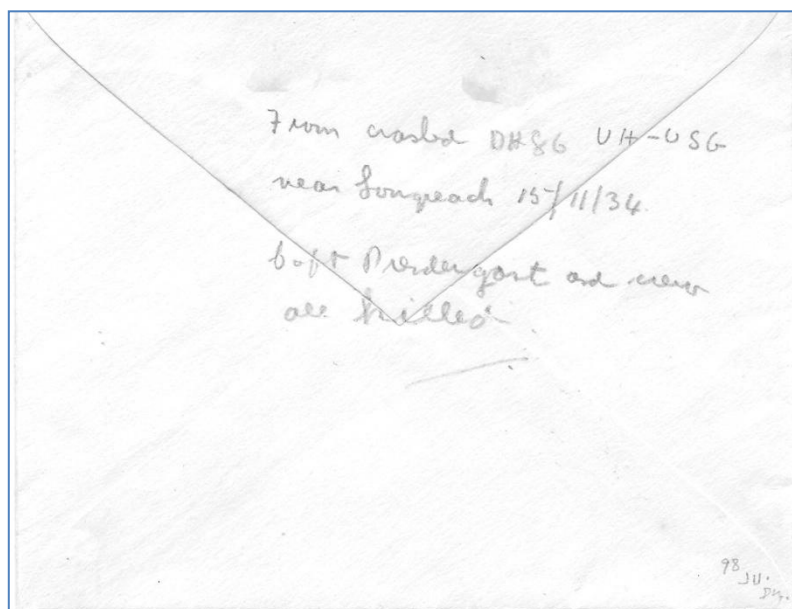
## The Mail

According to Doug Meadows, who had excellent contacts within QANTAS, including Hudson Fysh, less than six covers were carried on this flight from London to the site of the crash. **This is the only example seen by the author or Tom Frommer.**



Cover Carried on VH-USG from London – Crash Site; Ex Meadows and Frommer

**This is the only recorded cover from the crash.**



Endorsement by Hudson Fysh

The cover is endorsed on the reverse in the handwriting of Hudson Fysh:

***From crashed DH86 VH-USG  
near Longreach 15/11/34  
Capt Prendergast and crew  
all killed***