

PATRICK FERRY

When the war descended upon the suburbs: the North Melbourne air crash, 1943

On Saturday 4 September 1943, around 60,000 war-weary Melburnians gathered at Flemington Racecourse to enjoy a thrilling display of Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) aerial manoeuvres. Instead, they ended up witnessing first-hand a wartime tragedy as an out-of-control dive bomber crashed into the working-class suburb of North Melbourne, killing two air force officers.

Eighty years later, the day the war descended upon Melbourne's suburbs is largely forgotten. In retelling the story of that fateful event, this article uses images from the State Library Victoria collection to illustrate details preserved in historical records at the National Archives of Australia and contemporary newspaper accounts. It draws in particular on the Library's priceless Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, which was donated in 1976 and contains over 60,000 images accumulated by what was once a leading Australian newspaper. War and the 'home front' in Victoria are well represented in the collection.

Civil Defence Day, 4 September 1943

Saturday 4 September 1943 was officially designated as Civil Defence Day. During the war, Melburnians took part in extensive civil defence precautions

Fire fighters attempting to extinguish the blaze at the crash scene. The hole the plane punched through one of the warehouse's internal brick walls is clearly visible, 4 September 1943, H99.201/4066. Unless otherwise noted, photographs in this article were created by *The Argus* (Melbourne).

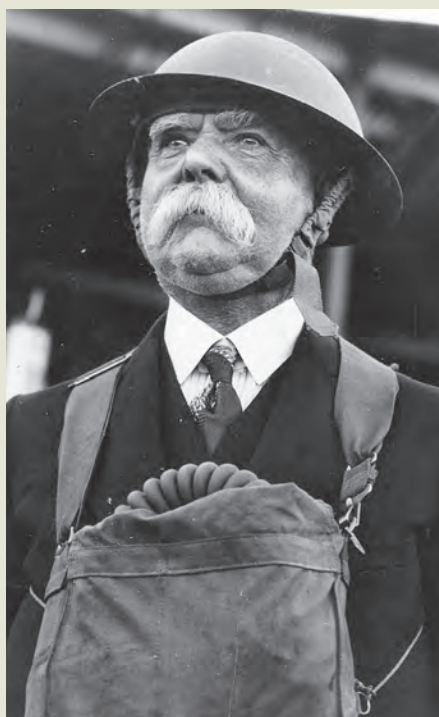




Civil defence vehicles taking part in the morning parade through the streets of Melbourne, 4 September 1943, H99.201/3763 (left), H99.201/5077 (right)

against potential aerial attack. Trenches and shelters were dug in parks, and air raid sirens installed. Civilians volunteered to become aircraft spotters, air raid precautions wardens and first aid officers. Local fire brigades learned how to extinguish incendiary bombs and practised drills on city streets and in the suburbs.

During 1942 and into 1943, Japanese aircraft bombed Darwin and other northern Australian towns. However, by September 1943, the threat of attack on mainland Australia was receding, as the Allies pushed Japanese forces back through New Guinea. Given this, a key objective of Civil Defence Day 1943 in Melbourne was to 'arouse' public interest in civil defence activities and counter growing complacency. Local air raid precautions officials also wanted to dispel the notion that they were 'funny little men in tin hats' by demonstrating that they were 'doing a serious job well'.¹ To do so, they organised a program of events to showcase civil defence preparedness for any attack on Melbourne. This included a display of simulated aerial attacks by the RAAF, including what was billed as the first ever demonstration of 'the terrors and thrills of dive bombing' in Melbourne.²



Civil defence in action in wartime Melbourne. **Top** *Digging an air raid shelter in Treasury Gardens, c. 1940, H99.201/3722* **Bottom left** 'Old Bill', an air raid precautions volunteer, c. 1941, H99.201/3893 **Bottom right** A civil defence drill at Brighton, c. 1941, H99.201/3713



Some of the spectators who gathered at Flemington to watch the afternoon's proceedings, including the RAAF aerial display, 4 September 1943, H99.201/5086

Civil Defence Day began with an impressive parade by 150 civil defence and emergency services vehicles through Melbourne's streets. Specially laid-on trains then conveyed the crowds to Flemington Racecourse.³ There, some 50,000–60,000 spectators watched as more than 10,000 civil defence volunteers marched past the governor, the premier and other dignitaries. This was followed by demonstrations of civil defence skills, including responding to simulated gas attacks, incendiary bombs and oil fires. The crowds then eagerly awaited the start of the RAAF aerial display. In addition to dive bombing, it was to include demonstrations of ground strafing, low-level bombing and parachute drops.⁴

At 3 pm, two Vultee Vengeance dive bombers from No. 1 Aircraft Depot took off from RAAF Laverton, just west of Melbourne. These were American-built twin-seater planes designed to dive almost vertically without lift from the wings pulling them off course. At the time, the RAAF was deploying the planes operationally in support of Allied offensives against Japanese positions in New Guinea.



Parades by air raid precautions and other civil defence personnel at Flemington, 4 September 1943, H99.201/5075 (top), H99.201/5073 (bottom)

The dive bombers, escorted by Spitfire fighter planes, approached Flemington from the west, with the afternoon sun behind them. While the Spitfires circled the racecourse, the dive bombers were to perform simulated attacks on a target positioned on the ground below. For greater effect, mobile anti-aircraft units defended the target, with squads of civil defence volunteers standing ready to show how they would respond to an actual air raid in Melbourne. The dive-bombing component of the aerial display was supposed to last for ten minutes.⁵

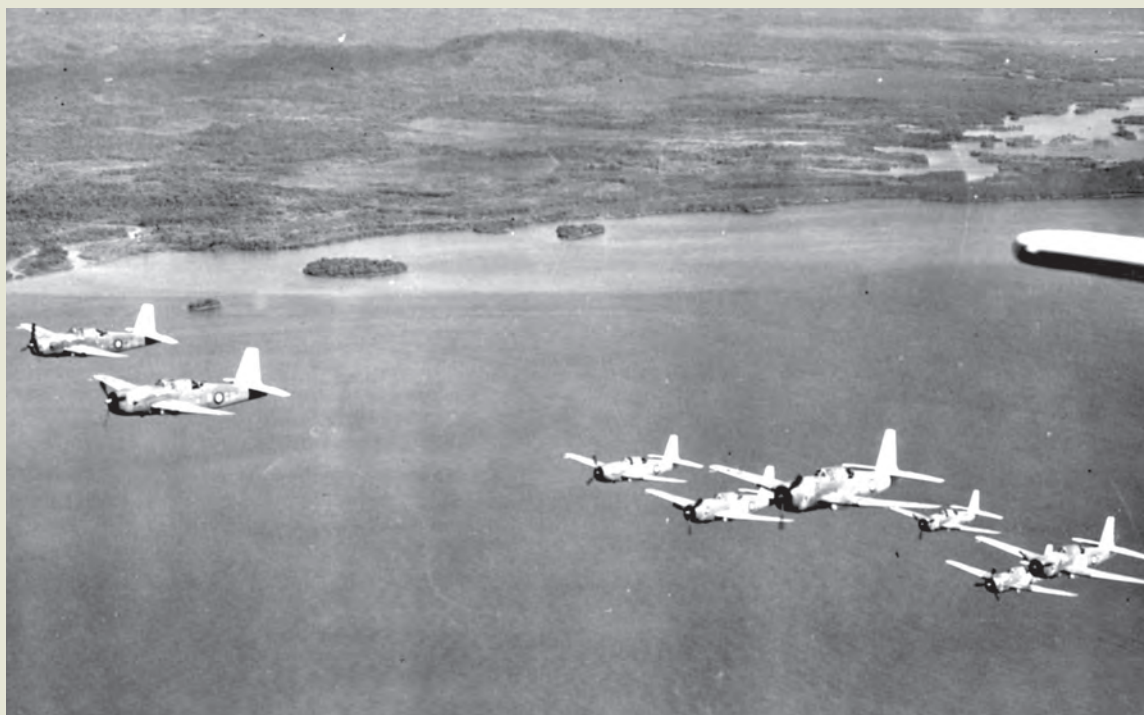
The first of the dive bombers to make its run on the target was A27-76, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Richard ('Dick') Roe, with Flying Officer James Noel Harris in the wireless air gunner's seat. Roe began by using a battle tactic, diving from the 'eye of the sun' at an estimated 480 kilometres per hour.⁶ He dropped a dummy bomb on the target, with explosives on the ground detonated to simulate the blast. Roe pulled out of the dive at about 300 metres above the ground. While gaining altitude, he performed what looked like a 'victory roll' before climbing to around 1800 metres, as the second Vultee Vengeance made its run on the target. Roe then did his second dive, pulling out at less than 200 metres from the ground. He seemingly began to make another victory roll but didn't complete it. Flying upside-down, A27-76 disappeared from the sight of those at the racecourse, obscured by a low hill and houses.⁷

The crash

The next thing the crowd saw was a giant plume of black smoke rising over North Melbourne in the distance. Many thought this was part of the display, and it took a few moments for the onlookers to realise that Roe's plane had crashed. Once they did, 'a shocked silence spread over the whole racecourse and watchers far beyond'.⁸

The plane had flown out of control for approximately 2 kilometres, rapidly losing altitude over the densely populated suburb of Kensington. It then skimmed over the top of Macaulay railway station at North Melbourne, where a packed train was waiting.⁹ Among the closest eyewitnesses were Ted Arnold and his wife, who were in their car, stopped at the railway level crossing at Macaulay station. They saw the plane roll onto its back then watched it continue flying until it slammed into the Victorian Wheatgrowers' Corporation warehouse and mill. A sheet of flames then shot out of the building.¹⁰

Another eyewitness, Ettie Corbett, was cycling on Macaulay Road near the railway line when she saw the plane heading in her direction. She later told *The Argus* she thought it was going to hit her: 'I was so terrified that I



Top RAAF Vultee Vengeance dive bombers over New Guinea, c. 1944, H98.100/4918
Bottom A wireless air gunner in the rear seat of a Vultee Vengeance aircraft, c. 1943, H98.100/4103



The large black plume of smoke spectators saw rising from the crash scene at North Melbourne, 4 September 1943, H99.201/3997

fell from my cycle, and the noise of the crash only 50 yards [45 metres] away, shocked me considerably'.¹¹

The crash was also witnessed by Eileen Evans and her son Ron. Eileen was a cousin of Dick Roe, who had arranged for them to be standing on a street corner in North Melbourne from where they could see the aerial display over Flemington. Roe had promised to 'dip his wings' for them during the display. Ron, who is now nearly 90 years of age and perhaps one of the last surviving eyewitnesses to the crash, still remembers the shock that came over his mother, who quickly took him back home. Witnessing the crash was so traumatic for Eileen that she never spoke of it again.¹²

The plane crashed into the warehouse's roof at an estimated 640 kilometres per hour.¹³ It tore through the building's internal brick walls and set the warehouse and its highly combustible contents ablaze. Fire brigade units from North Melbourne, Carlton and Eastern Hill responded. Auxiliary fire fighters who were part of the display at Flemington also rushed to the scene, putting their civil defence training into real-life action, trying to prevent the fire spreading to neighbouring properties.¹⁴



Fire fighters at the scene of the crash. The smouldering piece of wreckage in the middle of the frame appears to be part of the plane's engine block, 4 September 1943, H99.201/4067 Photographs, H2016.33/90

The plane itself was completely destroyed by the impact of the crash. The largest surviving remnants were the engine block and propeller.¹⁵ It was later reported that members of the large crowd that visited the scene souvenired fragments of the aircraft.¹⁶

The plane came down in a part of North Melbourne occupied by light industry, including warehouses and small factories. Fortunately, there was no one working in the warehouse at the time. Two resident cats kept to control mice somehow managed to survive the blast and subsequent fire. *The Argus* reported that the plane had crashed near a 'tenement of wooden villas'.¹⁷ This illustrates how close the incident came to being a major disaster. Had the plane continued just a short distance further, it would have slammed into a very densely populated neighbourhood containing tightly packed houses. The North Melbourne Gas Works, which stored a huge volume of natural gas, was also nearby.



This aerial view of North Melbourne taken by Charles Pratt in c. 1950–60 shows densely populated residential areas near the crash scene as well as the North Melbourne Gas Works with its large circular gasometer, Airspy Collection of Aerial Photographs, H2016.33/90

The killed pilots

Dick Roe and James Harris were both killed instantly. Their bodies were badly mutilated and burned. Indeed, Harris's family had to be dissuaded from viewing his body before the funeral.¹⁸

Originally from the Melbourne suburb of Canterbury, Harris had attended Melbourne High School before working as a salesperson.¹⁹ After enlisting in 1940, he trained as a wireless operator and air gunner with different RAAF squadrons. Harris rose to the rank of flight sergeant and in April 1943 was commissioned as a pilot officer with No. 1 Aircraft Depot, RAAF Laverton.²⁰ This was an aircraft maintenance unit which also undertook aircraft trials.

Dick Roe was from Benalla, a town 200 kilometres north-east of Melbourne. A railway clerk in civilian life, Roe had enlisted in the RAAF in September 1940 and went to Canada to train as a pilot under the Empire Training Scheme. He was later posted to 456 Squadron, RAAF, in the United Kingdom. This was a night fighter squadron deployed to help defend British



Left James Harris, Age, 23 September 1943, p. 4 **Right** Dick Roe, *Benalla Ensign*, 17 September 1943, p. 1. Courtesy of Carmen Quick

airspace from German bombers. After returning to Australia in May 1942, Roe was attached to 30 Squadron, RAAF, flying Beaufighters. He then saw action in New Guinea, flying 46 operational strikes. During the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943, Roe took part in a daring surprise raid on Malahang airfield, near Lae, helping to destroy six Japanese Zero aircraft on the ground.²¹ He was mentioned in dispatches and posthumously awarded the prestigious Distinguished Flying Cross for his gallantry in New Guinea. The citation described Roe as a 'determined and courageous pilot' who always pressed home his attacks despite fierce anti-aircraft fire.²² After his tour of duty in New Guinea, Roe was posted as a test pilot to No. 1 Aircraft Depot, RAAF Laverton.

Roe was one of Benalla's favourite sons. *The Benalla Ensign* eagerly followed his military career, reporting on his achievements.²³ When he was killed, the newspaper ran the story on its front page, eulogising Roe as 'Benalla's greatest airman'. Only a week before the fatal crash, he had flown to Benalla in a Boomerang aircraft, 'delighting' the locals with his 'skilful handling' of the plane.²⁴

Roe and Harris were given a full military funeral then laid to rest in the Springvale War Cemetery.

The aftermath

The RAAF convened a court of inquiry within days of the tragedy. With the plane destroyed and the pilots dead, the court could not determine the definitive cause of the crash. There was no evidence of mechanical failure, and Roe was found to be a very experienced pilot. The court also discounted the possibility that he had 'blacked-out'. However, it found that Roe had deviated from his flight instructions by performing unauthorised aerobatics at an unsafe height. A design flaw in the quick-release buckle on the pilot's safety harness was also identified. This could be accidentally knocked undone, especially when the pilot had to use both hands to control the aircraft, as Roe would have done while performing his victory roll. The court therefore concluded that the most probable cause of the crash was that the buckle came undone during the roll, causing Roe to fall away from the pilot's seat and lose control of the aircraft. This was thought to explain why he appeared to make no attempt to bring the plane back into an upright position before the crash.²⁵

The court recommended a ban on aeronautics using Vultee Vengeance aircraft until a modified harness buckle was introduced. It also recommended that sufficient time be given to RAAF units performing aerial displays to carry out practices beforehand so that senior officers could 'check any tendency shown by pilots to depart, in a dangerous manner, from instructions given, through a mistaken intention of making the display as spectacular as possible'.²⁶ Ultimately, Dick Roe's gesture in making the display as spectacular as possible for a war-weary Melbourne crowd cost him and James Harris their lives.

While the RAAF court of inquiry was held behind closed doors, the Victorian coronial inquest in November was heard in public. Inevitably, the media focused on the finding that Roe's victory roll had amounted to 'disobeyance of orders'.²⁷

Meanwhile, the Roe family in Benalla mourned Dick's death. They were no strangers to the tragedy of war, with their other son, Jack, having previously been taken as a prisoner of war by the Japanese.²⁸ Dick Roe's name was later inscribed on the Benalla Soldiers' Memorial. His and James Harris's names were also added to the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Tragically, James Harris left behind a widow, Zena, and an infant daughter.²⁹ His loss must have been devastating to them. In October 1943, Zena was granted a war widow's pension plus an extra amount for her daughter.³⁰ Somewhat bureaucratically, the RAAF contacted Zena about deficiencies in her late husband's service issue underclothes. Amid her grief, this must have

been extremely distressing. James's brother, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Harris, intervened to get the deficiency written off.³¹ Zena appears to have never remarried. She died in January 1999, aged 86 years.³²

To prevent future tragedies, Wing Commander John Lerew, the commanding officer of No. 1 Aircraft Depot, designed a new buckle for the safety harnesses in Vultee Vengeance aircraft.³³ Meanwhile, the Victorian Wheatgrowers' Corporation received £12,000 in compensation for the damage done to its warehouse and other losses. The neighbouring McLeod's Soap Company received £35 for skylights broken by the force of the crash and three large tanks of washing soda ruined by falling glass.³⁴

Interestingly, the North Melbourne air crash did not make headline news in the city's major newspaper *The Argus*. Instead, it was relegated to page 3 by the latest information on Allied advances in Europe and by the visit of America's first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, to Melbourne.³⁵ Many of the newspaper's photographs of the incident also remained unpublished. Although news of the incident could not be censored, perhaps the authorities prevailed on the newspaper to make as little of it as possible. Or, after four years of fighting, people may simply have become inured to such wartime tragedies, no matter how close to home or extraordinary the circumstances.

According to the local Hotham History Project, the crash never really lodged in the historical memory of North Melbourne as a suburb either. Several factors likely explain this. Neither pilot was local. The warehouse was also soon rebuilt, removing all physical traces of the crash. North Melbourne underwent major change in the decades after the war, with many of the people living there at the time of the crash moving away. Indeed, it was only in the 1990s that a memorial plaque was erected at the scene of the crash.³⁶ This illustrates the critical importance of libraries and archives as repositories of local history which can otherwise be lost or forgotten over time.