

## **My recollections of the Hangar Fire, HMAS Albatross, December 1976.**

*This is all from memory. It's my recollection of events that occurred 45 years ago. That combined with me now being in my 70's and with a failing memory, I accept no responsibility for its accuracy.*

Following our recruit training Keith McCarron, Wayne Bell and I were posted to the Jimmy's yard at HMAS Albatross, while we waited for our RAAF Photographic course to start. I became quite comfortable with the place and began to take an interest in its operation and its aircraft, an interest that has remained to this day.

After graduation from East Sale, I was relieved when I was posted again to RANAS Nowra. I was glad to be going somewhere that was familiar and not to Sydney.

I remember reporting in at the guard house on Sunday, 5th December. The PO behind the counter told me that they had lost a hangar full of aircraft the night before. Figuring he was joking I laughed, said "tell me another one", to which he became pretty aggressive and told me angrily that he'd been up all night fighting the fire.

I checked in, got a bunk somewhere and got myself settled.

The following morning I, reported to the Phot section, to Lt. Spike Jones. His immediate words were, "boy, do I have a job for you". He put me in POPH Charlie Lammers care and we became Albatross's connection with the Naval Board of Enquiry. I remember Charlie and Spike methodically working out how we were going to attack the job and over the next few weeks, they dedicated me to that task, which allowed the other Photos to carry on doing the usual photographic jobs for the Air Station.

It was all happening in December, hot and humid. My job was to take 120mm B&W shots as directed, but every shot had to have an identical 120mm colour photo taken too. So, I carried two Mamiya C330's with Mecablitz flash heads attached and one wet celled battery pack slung over my shoulder. Every time I took a photo, I'd change camera, unplug and re-plug the flash. I also carried a camera bag with spare film and extra wet cell flash batteries.

It was an uncomfortable task, there was no shelter from the sun, the site was dangerous, the debris stunk and it was heartbreaking. I remember watching as a crane tried to lift a melted engine to remove it from the scene, only for the entire 12' x 12' concrete slab that it had melted into, came up out of the ground, with it. I noticed that in amongst all the crumbling and twisted aluminium, some aircraft items remained intact. Things like brake components, cylinder liners, valves, their seats and springs and the wingtip and tail strobe light covers.

About 3 or 4 times a day I'd walk back to the section, unload and reload. I'd have a break and eventually get back to it. There were forensic police there too. I remember them using a stereo camera set up. It was always high on a tri-pod, about 8 feet above ground. They seemed to know what they were doing, but were really slow doing it. From memory we didn't converse much.

At one stage there was a conference about taking directly vertical infra-red images of the scene, so they could see the locations of the most intense parts of the fire. Any helicopter was ruled out because of the downwash, so, because they can fly so slowly, an Army Pilatus Porter was chosen. I remember being disappointed that I didn't get to do that job.

Over the months, Charlie and I built a couple of large folders/albums full of images. It was very slow going because all the colour stuff had to be sent to Kuttabul for processing. I will happily stand corrected on this, but ever since those days, I've carried the memory around that the taxpayer spent \$22,000+ on colour film, processing and printing.

Another thing I remember was being impressed with a brand new product that we'd just found. "Magic Tape." Sticky tape that you could write on. Imagine that? As each of the photos in these folders/albums needed numbers and captions, Magic Tape was a very welcome new tool and luckily, Charlie and I both had good handwriting.

I remember that ALL personnel, Navy and Civilian, approximately 2,000, were fingerprinted, early on in the investigation. I remember also that personnel couldn't depart the Depot for Christmas leave until they were fingerprinted. The investigation continued after we'd all returned from leave and eventually, through a process of elimination, a sailor was charged, but that's another story.

Eventually the day came. I reckon that about 99% of all of RANAS staff left their workstations to watch the replacement Trackers arrive. I remember hearing them approach, racing outside, watching and listening to them pass low overhead, in formation. All with their US Navy markings and all with our Kangaroo roundel's stuck over the US stars.

I have no idea where those folders/ albums that we created would be today, but I sure would like to look through them. It's my first work as a Navy Photographer.

I eventually got to fly in a Tracker. Near Darwin, June '81, we banged off Melbourne a couple of times and did several touch and goes. Loved it.