

THE LOST BEAUFIGHTER

by Charles Page



Bristol Beaufighter Mk 1c. *Courtesy Neil Mackenzie*

In June 2014, the lost Beaufighter of pilot Ronald Kerrigan and navigator Ronald Smith was found off Cable Beach, Broome, 70 years after it crashed into the sea. Neither Kerrigan nor Smith were ever found and were presumed killed on 18 September 1944.

Flight Sergeant Ronald Kerrigan was posted to 31 Squadron on 16 July 1944, flying Beaufighters out of Coomalie Creek, 70 km south of Darwin. The squadron had been conducting strikes on Japanese targets in Timor, and the Aru and Tanimbar Islands. Ronald took part in three strikes, and two operations, and was known by his second name Stephen or 'Steve' in the squadron. This avoided confusion with his navigator Flight Sergeant Ronald George Smith, who was a junior draftsman in Sydney before joining up.

In September 1944, RAAF Catalinas were conducting operations from Broome, and to provide air cover a flight of Beaufighters from 31 Squadron was detached there. On 13 September Ft

Lt John Klug led four Beaufighters from Coomalie to 79 OBU, Broome, with A19-163 crewed by Kerrigan and Smith.

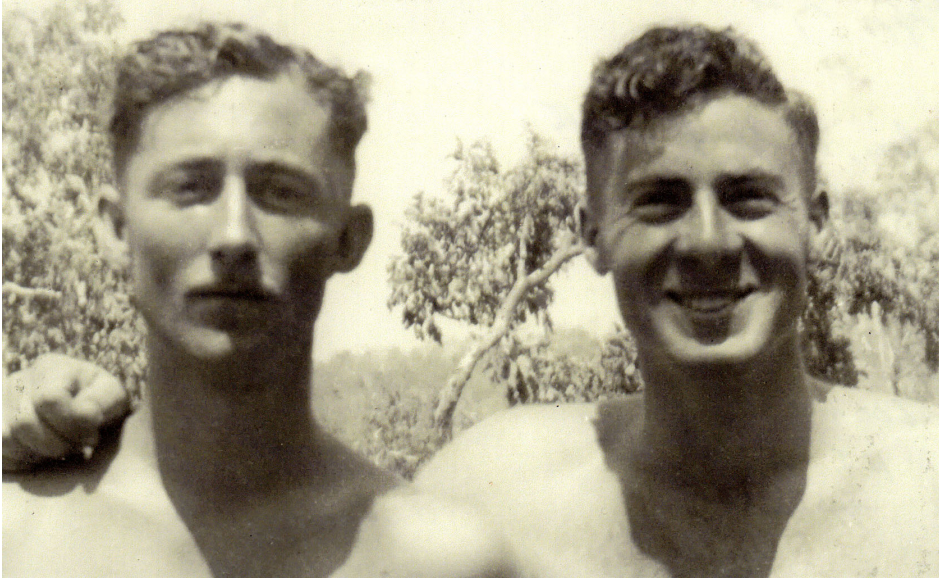
Ronald Stephen Kerrigan was born in Perth on 3 May 1924. He attended Perth Boys School, followed by Perth Technical College, and was employed as a window dresser with tobacconists WD & HO Wills. On 11 February 1942, he enrolled in 75 Squadron Air Training Corps, at Christian Brothers College, Perth.

On turning 18 he enlisted in the RAAF and was sent to Geraldton for guard duties. However, he was determined to fly, and was posted to No 4 Initial Training School, Victor Harbor on 3 January 1943. He then trained on Tiger Moths at No 9 Elementary Flying Training School, Cunderdin, and advanced to Ansons at No 4 Service Flying Training School, Geraldton,

Ronald was awarded his 'Wings' on 26 August 1943, and after a stint as staff pilot on Ansons, he converted onto the Bristol Beaufighter at No 5 Operational

Training Unit, Tocumwal. This fast twin engine fighter bomber was often described for obvious reasons as 'two engines followed by a fuselage' but to the Japanese it was the 'Whispering Death'. This was due to its devastating firepower and the remarkably quiet sleeve valve Hercules engines. After completing the Beaufighter conversion, Ronald joined No 31 Squadron at Coomalie Creek, from where he flew several operations before detachment to Broome.

On 18 September 1944, Kerrigan and Smith in Beaufighter A19-163 were detailed to carry out a seaward patrol from Broome, along with Taylor and Packman in A19-140. The aircraft had a daily inspection and at 0425 hrs, Kerrigan started the twin engines and taxied to the east end of the Broome runway, where he ran up the engines. With indications seeming normal, he lined up on the runway, and after some 200 yards, opened up the throttles, throwing up a heavy cloud of dust. From



Ronald Smith (L) and Ronald Kerrigan, Coomalie Creek, 1944. *Courtesy Val Bullied.*

dispersal, Flight Sergeant Schillerman noticed that the aircraft was not climbing normally.

Taylor, in A19-140, waited until the dust cleared enough to see the runway flares and commenced his take-off. However, after only about 150 yards he saw a bright glare and a flash of flame and smoke just to the left of the runway and approximately 1 ½ miles ahead. Fearing the worst, Taylor abandoned his take-off, rolled to the far end of the runway and called for ambulance and emergency crews.

Meanwhile, Flight Sergeant Schillerman and Leading Aircraftman Heald had arrived by truck at the end of the runway, and after climbing up a sandhill, observed the flames and smoke out to sea. It seemed certain that A19-163 had crashed into the sea.

The crash was seen by the station manager of *Thangoo* cattle station, who observed a large sheet of flame that lit up the horizon. This was also seen by the No 327 Radar Station operator, who heard two loud explosions. However, another witness stated he heard four explosions. Other witnesses thought the aircraft caught fire before crashing, but this was not confirmed.

A search boat was sent to investigate the crash site about one mile west of Cable Beach, and floating debris was found over about 500 yards. It was considered that the wings had disintegrated on impact and that the

fuel tanks had exploded. The main wreckage was in 30 feet of water, but diving efforts were unsuccessful due to tides and nil underwater visibility.

A Court of Enquiry was held at Broome on 20 September 1944, and concluded that the cause was 'obscure'. However, it went on to suggest that the pilot was not experienced on the aircraft (Kerrigan had over 400 hours total and 91 hours on type) and may have had difficulty controlling the Beaufighter on a night take-off, with no horizon.

Many take-off accidents have been attributed to the false climb illusion, caused by rapid acceleration. This affects the inner ear balance, and a pilot may have the impression he is climbing too steeply and push down on the controls. The Beaufighter was particularly prone, as the short nose gave no horizon reference. However, in the case of A19-163, this can only be speculation, especially as very little of the wreckage had been found and inspected.

In 2012 Broome historian Dion Marinis and helicopter pilot Jim Miles began a search for the wreckage. Two years later, using side scan sonar and metal detection, they found the debris field, and scuba-dived on the target area. They discovered the wing spars, tail wheel, tail plane and 20mm Hispano cannons, along with live rounds. On the next dive both engines were found, and the port engine was found to have

an exploded cylinder. This opened up the strong possibility of an engine failure during or after take-off as being the cause of the accident. It was also revealed that the aircraft had a long history of engine faults.

After the Kerrigan and Smith families were advised of the find, a memorial was erected at Cable Beach, with the assistance of Broome Shire. Then, 70 years to the exact date of the crash, an emotional Dawn Service was held, with three generations of family members, a school choir, and RAAF personnel, including Wing Commander Joe Elkington from No 31 Squadron. After the service, relatives were taken by boat to the wreck site, where a final ceremony gave closure.

Ronald Kerrigan and Ronald Smith are commemorated at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, and the Sydney Memorial, Rookwood. Ronald Kerrigan is also commemorated at the State War Memorial, Kings Park, Perth, and on the 7 Wing Australian Air Force Cadets Honour Board, and Book of Remembrance at RAAF Pearce. The accident is also featured in the book *Wings of Valour*.

Sources: NAA Kerrigan R S, A9301 Service Record, A705 Casualty File. NAA A9845 Beaufort Accidents. AWM, CWG. Dion Marinis, Jim Miles, Val Bullied, ABC Kimberley, Ken Grimson. *Wings of Valour*, Charles Page.



Memorial to Ronald Kerrigan and Ronald Smith, Cable Beach, Broome. *Courtesy Val Bullied*