

Dear Sparks from the Past followers: We previously interrupted our sequence of Waterfront Wars from September to November to bring you information surrounding the 50th Anniversary of the Lord Howe airstrip and its construction in 1974. In the December Signal we return to the Waterfront Wars sequence detailing the tussle between Trans Oceanic Airways and Qantas over bitter rivalry on the Lord Howe route.

Sparks from the Past – Waterfront Wars – Part 15C

The Sinking of Qantas Catalina VH-EAW on its Mooring at Rose Bay – Who Was Responsible?

When a Qantas Catalina broke its mooring during a wild storm at Lord Howe on the night of the 23rd June, 1949, rumours of possible sabotage surfaced. Had the mooring been tampered with by a Trans Oceanic Airways flying boat crew who had been at Lord Howe the previous night? Unsurprisingly, no shred of evidence was ever produced to support this extraordinary allegation – indeed an official investigation found a corroded mooring line was responsible. However, the deteriorating relationship between Qantas and TOA plummeted to all-time lows when an explosion and fire demolished a Qantas Catalina, VH-EAW, moored overnight at Rose Bay, Sydney. Again, two perspectives emerged from this event: one from Hudson Fysh, Qantas Managing Director recorded in *'Wings to the World'*; and a very contrary one from Bryan Monkton in *'The Boats I Flew'*.

From Wings to the World – the Qantas Perspective – Hudson Fysh

"The loss [of Catalina VH-EAX on the rocks at Lord Howe Island] placed us at a great disadvantage but we were able to continue the service [to Lord Howe] until when, at 2.22am, on Saturday morning, 27th August, 1949, the Catalina VH-EAW blew up at its Rose Bay Mooring with a roar that woke me in my home at Wallaroy Road. At first, it was thought that the problem facing Gordon Fraser [QANTAS Security Manager] was an internal matter, an accidental explosion. But when the shattered wreckage was fished up from the bottom of the bay, an apparatus, foreign to the aircraft, was found under the seat of the flight engineer.

Sabotage was so clearly indicated that further investigation was handed over to the police, Detective Sergeant Alridge of the Arson Squad taking over. The apparatus consisted of a piece of fruit case board, measuring approximately 18" by 9" by 1/2", through which several holes had been drilled.

Attached to the board by means of string and fishing cord was an alarm clock, six volt battery, and a vibrator coil similar to that used on an old T model Ford car. There was no sign of a lead to an explosive charge and it was assumed that the unit was designed primarily to throw a spark...



Image from the DVD "From the Sea to the Sky" courtesy Film Affairs



Catalina wreckage– Sun (Sydney) Monday 29 August 1949, page 5.

No traces of explosive were found on the aircraft but it was discovered that a locking device had been broken on the port side fuel gauge. The starboard side fuel flow meter was broken, allowing petrol to drain into the engineer's compartment.

It was assumed that the apparatus threw a spark; this had ignited the escaping petrol fumes and an explosion and fire had resulted. It was a very neat job, but the perpetrators had not expected the apparatus to be recovered virtually intact. In a City Coroner's court evidence was given which led to the arrest of an executive officer of TOA [Bryan Monkton] and his trial before judge Curlewis on a charge of causing malicious damage to a flying boat.

A strong alibi was submitted and the defendant was acquitted. The whole affair was an unfortunate episode for both TOA and Qantas" (Pp 71-72)

From The Boats I Flew – a TOA Perspective – Bryan Monkton

"On 27 August, 1949, a Qantas Catalina returned late from a delayed Solomons flight, landing at Rose Bay shortly before midnight.

Not long after the passengers and crew had been taken ashore, an explosion occurred on board and the aircraft caught fire, burning fiercely and eventually sinking at its moorings. As it happened, PG [Taylor] and his wife Joan were dining with Nancy and me at our home on the top of Bellevue Hill that evening. Although it was almost midnight when the Taylors left, none of us heard the Catalina arrive, nor did Nancy or I hear the subsequent explosion. The first I knew of the accident was through the radio news next morning, and although intrigued by such a dramatic event occurring in our area, and involving one of the well-known Rose Bay aircraft, I didn't think there could be anything sinister about it, assuming that some fault had occurred in equipment left running in error.

Down at the flying boat base various theories were being bandied around, most of which were similar to my own. There were also the usual light-hearted jokes by Qantas staff accusing their friends in TOA of 'blowing up their aircraft' which everyone took in good humour. My surprise was great therefore when, after the wrecked aircraft was raised and brought ashore, the Qantas security people announced they had found on board a device which could have caused the explosion! Immediately everyone was speculating as to whom could have had a reason for wanting this aircraft eliminated, the most logical suspect being a businessman named Campbell who had bought a number of Catalinas from the Disposals Commission and was trying to sell one or two of them to Qantas.

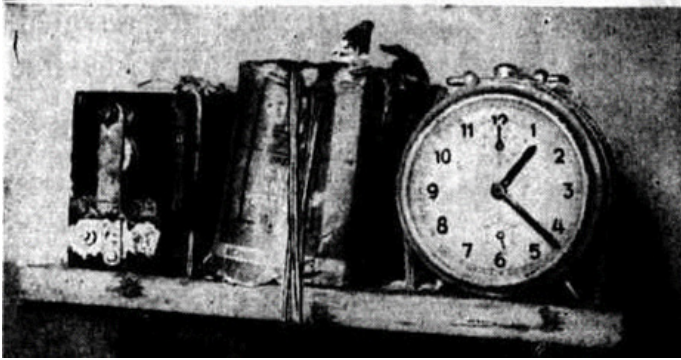


Douglas Lindsay - Truth (Sydney)
Sunday 12 February 1950, P. 11

The police seemed to be getting nowhere in the case, and it was not long before everyone got on with his work and forgot about the incident. However, I had not reckoned on the spiteful revenge of an ex- employee.

A few months before, to my great regret, Lindsay [Douglas Lindsay had been Business Manager at TOA] had been forced to leave the company in some disgrace after he had fiddled the books and misappropriated a substantial sum of money... I was surprised to receive a visit in my office from two police detectives about a month after the Catalina incident. They showed me a letter from our ex-employee in Hong Kong in which he alleged I told him six months before that I was planning to sabotage a Qantas Catalina, for what reason he did not say. To me it was such an absurd allegation that I openly laughed expecting my visitors to see the humour of it too, but to my amazement they were serious and informed me that I would have to accompany them to the city watchhouse where I might expect to be formally charged with the destruction of the aircraft.

TIMING DEVICE OF CATALINA'S BOMB



This device is said to have ignited leaking fuel inside the Catalina – Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate (NSW), Wednesday, 31 August, 1949, Page 3. One of the unanswered questions at Monkton's trial was how it had been recovered unscathed when it was supposed to have ignited a massive fire and explosion aboard VH-EAX?!

I couldn't believe this was really happening, and while confident of the eventual outcome, could see that any impending proceedings could have a serious effect on me personally and possibly the future of our company. After some questioning at police headquarters and the taking of my statement denying any knowledge of the affair, I was formally charged and released on bail. In due course there was a coronial enquiry before a magistrate. At this hearing the 'device' that was alleged to have caused the fire was exhibited to the court and my solicitor and I had an opportunity to examine it closely. Its crude construction and the amateurish way it had been put together... looked like something hastily fabricated by a practical joker and slipped on board after the aircraft was raised from the water. This object consisted of a rough piece of wood broken off a packing case, on which were assembled an alarm clock, a battery and a small wooden box said to be capable of producing a high-voltage spark. These three items were held to the board by a few turns of coarse household string. The loose fibres of the string were not singed as one might have expected and neither the wooden box nor the paper case of the battery were even slightly scorched. Furthermore, the glass of the cheap kitchen alarm clock was unbroken and, somewhat amusingly, still had the price scrawled on it. This object consisted of a rough piece of wood broken off a packing case, on which were assembled an alarm clock, a battery and a small wooden box said to be capable of producing a high-voltage spark. These three items were held to the board by a few turns of coarse household string.

The loose fibres of the string were not singed as one might have expected and neither the wooden box nor the paper case of the battery were even slightly scorched. Furthermore the glass of the cheap kitchen alarm clock was unbroken and, somewhat amusingly, still had the price scrawled on it.

My solicitor said it was hard to believe that the police were basing part of their case on such evidence or, for that matter, on the unsupported statement of a disgruntled employee and, in his opinion, someone was trying to set me up. This strengthened my belief that the whole matter would be quickly resolved if it ever came before a jury. Although my solicitor stressed the weakness of the police case against me to the magistrate I was nevertheless committed for trial. Although I remained confident of a quick and easy acquittal, our company solicitor insisted on briefing one of the most expensive barristers in Sydney. I found this gentleman highly annoying as he refused to recognise the significance of several discrepancies in the police evidence, particularly that of the unscarred condition of the device alleged to be at the centre of the fire.

Consequently, on the day of the trial I was nervous as it was obviously going to be a humiliating and embarrassing ordeal. Qantas, which appeared to be keen to help the prosecution, had flown in their principal witness from Hong Kong. Although I was concerned that the jury might believe the statements of this smooth-talker, I had no need to worry as my barrister quickly got poor Lindsay's measure and skilfully proceeded to demolish his credibility, often to the amusement of the court. Then PG [Taylor] took the stand and in cross-examination gave some logical reasons why the destruction of the Catalina was of no benefit to our company and in fact was very much the reverse. He also confirmed that he had left our house only a short time before the incident occurred and it would have been impossible for me to walk the mile and a half to Rose Bay and get out to the aircraft in such a short time. He was asked why he thought the defendant would have walked 'Because if he had taken his well-known sports car', explained PG, 'someone would have recognised it. And there was no way he could have got out to the aircraft as he did not own a boat and would have been stopped by the guards had he tried to use any of the craft at the base.'



The Truth (Sydney), Sunday 16 July 1950, P. 6

"ACQUITTED MAN HAD GRIM TIME"

"Captain Bryan Wills Monkton (34), managing director of Trans- Oceanic Airways Pty. Ltd., said last night that it was 'pretty grim' for an innocent man to be placed among convicted criminals at Long Bay Gaol while undergoing his trial. 'Under our British conception of justice an accused person is adjudged innocent until he is found guilty,' Monkton said. Monkton was acquitted at Darlinghurst Sessions on Friday on a charge of having blown up a Qantas Catalina plane on August 27 at Rose Bay. Monkton said it was also 'pretty grim' to be handed a chunk of bread and a bowl of soup at Long Bay... 'Most of the fellows ... I was travelling around with in the Black Maria, and was handcuffed to, were convicted. 'I don't see why people until they are actually guilty should be treated like that.' Monkton said that he was going straight back to business. At the trial the Crown alleged that Monkton set petrol flowing in the £24,000 flying boat and caused an explosion. The defence was an Alibi".

Such logical support from this respected person no doubt carried much weight with the jury. My wife Nancy then swore that I had not left our bedroom after we had retired for the night. Other good friends also came forward, taking the stand to vouch on oath for what they alleged was my good character and integrity. Finally, when the last witness had come and gone and the prosecution summed up its case, my high-priced and pompous barrister, speaking with obvious enjoyment and no doubt at astronomical cost per minute, launched into a long-winded argument in which he dwelt at embarrassing length on my war record, hinted that the police and Qantas should have targeted much more likely suspects, and finished by having another crack at Lindsay. Then the jury filed out, the court was adjourned and everyone went off to lunch while I was incarcerated in an airless cell below the courthouse. After some three hours in these depressing conditions, I was taken upstairs and everyone came back into court.

The jury filed in and the foreman, with a rather irreverent grin on his face which the judge generously ignored, announced that they found me – NOT GUILTY! Phew! What a relief After thanking my barrister and solicitor, Nancy and I went off to the Marble Bar of the Hotel Australia and had a private celebration with a bottle of Bollinger. But although it was one thing to be cleared of this charge, I knew that unless it was discovered what really happened and who, if anyone, was actually responsible there would always be some who would delight in saying how lucky I had been to get off.

The company hired a firm of private investigators to make their own enquiries but, although these sleuths seemed confident they were on the track of those responsible, they could not get the evidence to prove it. My own theory still remained; that some piece of electrical equipment – a fuel transfer or booster pump perhaps – had been left running, had overheated and caused a fuel fire. Then some ill-willed person had seized the opportunity to slip the crude device into the aircraft to make it look like sabotage. It was all James Bond stuff, anyway." (Pp 146-149.)

In the Next Episode of Water Front Wars (January Signal) we look at the enormous support (local and mainland) offered to Qantas when it commenced its flying boat service to Lord Howe in December, 1947. Yet despite this support, the Qantas service only lasted a little over three years, and the airline mysteriously withdrew from the route with little explanation around March, 1951.