

Plane crash at Sylvania

On 30 January 1959, Pilot Lieutenant Peter J. Arnold picked up a Fairey Gannet XA332 from Bankstown airport just before 12.00. Four minutes later disaster struck, even though the plane had just been serviced.

At Port Hacking High School student Daphne Salt was looking out the window when she saw the plane falling apart. The tail dropped off and the engine exploded. The pilot – the only casualty – was buried at Woronora Cemetery with full military honours.

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On 30 January 1959, Lt Peter J. Arnold strapped himself into a Fairey Gannett XA332 prior to taking off from Bankstown Airport.

The 27-year old married father of one, was taking delivery of the aircraft following routine servicing by Fairey Aviation at Bankstown. The Gannet was designed and first built in England in 1949 as a robust (but ungainly-looking) carrier-borne anti-submarine aircraft capable of carrying up to three crew members. It had originally been delivered to 816 Squadron in May 1956.

After the sole pilot and occupant of the aircraft that day had been given clearance for take-off, Lt. Arnold gunned the engine, taxied onto the runway and sped down the tarmac. He then lifted the nose of the Gannet into the sky, quickly reaching his initial flight level of 1,500 feet.

The takeoff had been observed by a test pilot from the De Havilland Aviation Co., Fl. Lt E. Shaw. He later testified seeing a very bumpy take-off from the airfield.

Around four minutes into his flight, and gaining extra altitude Arnold set a south-easterly direction towards Nowra. When the aircraft was about half a mile from the airfield, Lt Shaw saw it yaw violently to port, and at the same time both wings seem to waffle as if hitting a stump. The Gannet then appeared to proceed as normal.

The accident report contained witnesses who all agreed that some four to five miles from the airfield, the pilot lowered the undercarriage and retracted it again almost immediately, and at the same time the Gannet was yawing and dipping and lifting its wings. At about eight miles from Bankstown Airport and 1.5 miles short of the crash site, the Gannet was flying at a much lower altitude – around 350-400 feet – still yawing and dipping and lifting its wings. Soon after, while approaching the Princes Highway, the tail unit of the aircraft began to break up, and five pieces were seen to fall from the aircraft over a distance of about 700 yards.

The Gannet seemed to remain on a fairly even keel until the elevators were lost and it climbed steeply, with the engine note rising sharply. The plane levelled out, banked to the right, and then to the left and rapidly lost altitude. It wobbled and plummeted uncontrollably towards the ground, flying low over Sylvania Public School and narrowly missing 150 campers at the Jubilee Caravan Park and three nearby houses. It rolled over to the left nearing the ground and struck the ground in a nearly inverted position just by Bellingarra Rd, to the west of Gwawley Creek and north of Box Road, Sylvania. It exploded on impact and a raging fire ensued.

Daphne Salt was at Port Hacking High School, looking out of the window when she heard the spluttering of a failing prop airplane engine. 'Everyone rushed to the windows and we watched in silence as a Fairey Gannet plane fell apart in the sky. 'The tail dropped off and the engine exploded ... It looked like it was all happening in slow motion.' They heard another explosion and saw a column of black smoke and flames across the park just down the road.

Police later recovered the tail section less than a kilometre from where the Gannet crashed. Firemen began to extinguish the blaze as police cordoned off the roads, diverted traffic and set up road barriers around the wreckage. A big enough space

was cleared for a helicopter to land, carrying several senior naval officers. Navy guards were posted around the wreckage as the officers began an immediate investigation into the crash.

One young student from Sylvania Heights Primary School, Gary Sykes, found parts of the engine in the back yard of his house in Henry Street just five doors from the primary school.

The pilot was the only casualty. He was buried at Woronora Cemetery with full military honours.

References:

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