A FAILED ENDEAVOUR: AN AEROPLANE CRASH IN SURBITON, 1919.

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ABSTRACT

On 13 November 1919, an aeroplane named *Endeavour* took off from Hounslow aerodrome [TW4 5AF] on the first leg of a journey to Australia. Sadly, it crashed just over five miles away, in Lower Marsh Lane, Surbiton [KT1 3BN] and both occupants, Lieutenants James Ross and Roger Douglas, of the Australian Flying Corps, were killed. They were in pursuit of a prize of £10,000 offered by the Australian Government for the first aeroplane to fly from England to Australia within 30 days. According to newspapers, which varied in detail, the inquest's verdict was that the deaths were due to accidental causes and no specific person was to blame. However, questions posed by interested parties remained unanswered. The report of the Air Council's inquiry was not available, but *The Times* reported an official conclusion that the pilot, flying low because of thick mist, had stalled the aeroplane and thereafter it went into a spin before it crashed. *Endeavour* was designed for high flying and, as the pilot, Roger Douglas, sat behind the navigator, he had limited forward vision. After the disaster, James Peters, *Endeavour's* designer, left the aircraft industry and The Alliance Company withdrew from the market.

INTRODUCTION

The Times of London, on Friday, 14 November 1919, reported that on the previous day, 13 November 1919, two Australian airmen had left Hounslow at 11.33 a.m. in an Alliance aeroplane, fitted with a Napier engine. They were attempting to fly to Australia, but their machine crashed at Surbiton, and both were killed. Previously the aircraft had been seen over South Teddington "low down and making unusual noises"; then, on reaching Kingston it "wobbled a great deal". Thereafter, for a short time it "travelled smoothly", before it narrowly missed some houses and nosedived into an orchard. A large tree was struck and the propeller was buried in the ground. The *Times* went on to say that an explosion followed, the aeroplane burst into flames and shortly all that was left was a "heap of smouldering debris". However, a report of the crash in *The Surrey Comet* of Saturday,15 November 1919 certainly did not talk of an explosion of "heap of smouldering debris". On Monday 17 November 1919, *The Surrey Advertiser* reported that "The aeroplane in which Lieutenant Roger M. Douglas, M.C., D.C.M, as pilot and Lieutenant J.S.B. Ross, as navigator, started from Hounslow

Aerodrome at 11.30 on Thursday morning in an attempt to fly to Australia for a prize of £10,000 offered by the Commonwealth Government, came to disaster at Surbiton just before noon." It continued, "The machine crashed to earth in a field between Lower Marsh Lane and Surbiton Cemetery, and both pilot and navigator were killed." This article made no mention of an explosion or the crashed machine bursting into flames. **Figure 1,** reproduced from Kingston Aviation Heritage Project's [KAHP] website, is a picture of the Alliance aeroplane, possibly taken on 12 November 1919 before it left Acton Aerodrome for the short flight to Hounslow Aerodrome, later to crash at Surbiton.[1] A picture of the crashed machine, **Figure 2**, taken from *The Bystander* of 19 November 1919, was not that of a "heap of smouldering debris". This paper looks at what lay before and after the tragic aeroplane crash at Surbiton in 1919.

THE AEROPLANE & ITS ENGINE

During 1918, the last year of the Great War, there was a demand for aircraft manufacture. Waring and Gillow, furniture makers, formed the Alliance Aeroplane Company, absorbed the Ruffy, Arnell and Baumann Aviation Company and took over London's Acton Aerodrome. Waring and Gillow had expertise in manufacturing structures of wood and cloth which was appropriate to aircraft construction of the time. The Alliance company assisted in the building of several hundred biplanes and triplanes for the De Havilland and Handley-Page aircraft companies. Later, Alliance began production of aircraft for civilian use.[2]

Figure 1. Computer-enhanced picture of Alliance Seabird P2, G-EAOX. Original possibly taken at Acton Aerodrome on 12 November 1919.

Figure 2. Computer-enhanced picture of the aeroplane crash scene. From *The Bystander*, 19 November 1919.

On 23 October 1919, aircraft G-EAOX, named *Endeavour*, was registered by the Civil Aviation Authority and, according to the official record form, its certificate of registration was 389389 with File No. D42251. The form described the aircraft as *Alliance P.2* and its constructor's number was entered as *P.2. Australian*. The form had a column for a *Certificate of Airworthiness,* a *Certificate of Validation and Lapse of Registration*. No data was entered the first two columns, but the last indicated that the machine was destroyed or permanently withdrawn from use in November 1919.[3]

The 450-horsepower British Napier Lion engine was relatively compact and light. It was well-adapted for aeroplane use and it permitted low and efficient propeller speeds. Importantly, the carburettors, magnetos, sparking plugs, oil pressure relief valve and oil filter were designed for ease of accessibility.[4] This type of engine had been fitted to the Alliance Seabird aircraft that made the first non-stop flight from London to Madrid on 31 July 1919. The flight of approximately 900 miles took about 7¾ hours. This aircraft was co-piloted by Captain W. R. Curtis, RAF, and James Arthur Peters, its designer. The Napier company included testimonials from them in advertisements in the *London Times* of 19 August and 11 September 1919. The pilots expressed confidence in the reliability of the engine and stated that the aircraft had used less than one-third of its fuel capacity.

THE AIRMEN

Pictures of the two airmen are in the inset of **Figure 1**. James Stewart Leslie Ross is on the righthand side. He was born in Moruya, New South Wales, Australia, in 1895 and was a telegraph operator with the Pacific Cable Company before he enlisted in

1916 and went to France as a wireless operator with the 69th Squadron, Royal Flying Corps. Later this was renamed the "3rd Australian Squadron", which was engaged on photographic reconnaissance. After being trained as a pilot in Oxford, England, Ross was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Australian Flying Corps on 20 October 1917.

After a spell of ferrying aeroplanes across the Channel from England to France, Ross joined a squadron which carried out bombing raids on roads taking German units to the front during the Spring Offensive of 1918. Later, in combat against enemy aeroplanes in August 1918, he was shot through the thigh but managed to bring his aircraft safely back to his base in France. Thereafter, he was sent to hospital in England, and did not return to France again before the Armistice.

Roger Douglas was born in Charter Towers, Queensland, Australia, in 1894. He worked as a printer and was a boxing champion in Queensland. On 11 May 1915, after a spell of duty in the Australian Garrison Artillery, he enlisted as a private soldier in the Australian Imperial Force and saw action in Gallipoli from 11 July 1915 until the evacuation in December 1915. In this time, he was promoted up to the rank of sergeant. In March 1916, his battalion went to France, and he was posted to the 7th Machine-Gun Company. At Pozières in early August 1916, his exceptional bravery and leadership was recognised with a Distinguished Conduct Medal and a 2nd Lieutenant's commission. On 25 November 1916, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. On 28 December 1917, he was awarded the Military Cross in recognition of his gallantry at Polygon Wood in September 1917. By 26 November 1917, he had joined the Australian Flying Corps. He began his training at Reading, England, in March 1918 and qualified as a pilot on 5 May 1918. He was appointed as an instructor with the 5th Australian Training Squadron in England and never flew in combat.[5]

THE GREAT AIR RACE

In February 1919, the Australian Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, initiated a prize of £10,000 for the first successful flight from Australia to Great Britain to stimulate the development of air travel. This matched a prize offered in 1913 by London's *Daily Mail* newspaper for a trans-Atlantic crossing. Delayed by the Great War, it was not until June 1919 that John Alcock and Arthur Brown, in a modified Vickers Vimy bomber, successfully crossed the Atlantic from Newfoundland to Ireland, thus demonstrating that flight to Australia was feasible. The rules of the Great Air Race were set by the UK's Royal Aero Club. Only Australian airmen were eligible; they had to supply their

own British-made machine; a time limit of 30 days was imposed; and entrants had to depart either from Hounslow Aerodrome, west of London, or from Calshot, near Portsmouth, if in seaplanes. Darwin in Australia was set as the end point, and the prize would remain open until the end of 1920. As well as Douglas and Ross in their Alliance aircraft, the other contestants were as follows.

On 21 October 1919, Captain George Campbell Matthews, pilot, and Sergeant Thomas D. Kay, mechanic, left Hounslow at 1144 hours in a Sopwith Wallaby aeroplane, registration G-EAKS. Bad weather delayed them at Cologne and Vienna. They were temporarily imprisoned as suspected Bolsheviks, then delayed by snow, in Yugoslavia. A cracked engine cylinder delayed them at Constantinople, Turkey, and they were further delayed by bad weather in Aleppo, Syria. Finally, on 17 April 1920, they crash-landed on the island of Bali and Captain Matthews was slightly injured.

On 12 November 1919 at 0830 hrs, Captain Ross Macpherson Smith and his brother Lieutenant Keith Macpherson Smith, as pilots, with Sergeants Wally Shiers and Jim Bennett as mechanics, left Hounslow in a converted Vickers Vimy bomber [G-EAOU] at 0830 hours. They flew via Lyon, Rome, Cairo, Damascus, Basra, Karachi, Delhi, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon, Singora, Singapore, Batavia and Surabaya. They reached Australia, after some trials and tribulations, at 1640 hours on 10 December 1919. They won the prize, and it was shared between the four members of the crew. The flight distance was an estimated to be 11,123 miles and the total flying time was 135 hours and 55 minutes. The Smith brothers received knighthoods for their achievement.

On 21 November 1919, Captain Hubert Wilkins, Lieutenant V. Rendle, as co-pilots, with Lieutenants D. R. Williams and Garnsey St. C. Potts as crew, left Hounslow in a Blackburn Kangaroo aircraft [G-EAOW]. Engine problems forced them down over France. After repairs were made, the flight continued but engine problems recurred. Eventually, on 8 December 1919, their aircraft crash-landed at Suda Bay, Crete, and all the airmen escapes uninjured.

On 5 December 1919, Captain Cedric E. Howell and Lieutenant George Henry Fraser left Hounslow in a Martinsyde Type A Mk. 1 aircraft [G-EAMR]. On 9 December 1919, the machine disappeared near Corfu. The wreckage and Captain Howell's body were found offshore, but Lieutenant Fraser's body was never found.

On 8 January 1920, Lieutenants Ray Parer and John C. McIntosh, as co-pilots, left Hounslow in an Airco DH.9 aircraft [G-EAQM]. They eventually completed the flight on 2 August 1920 and were awarded a consolation prize of £1,000.[6]

THE INQUEST ON DOUGLAS & ROSS

The inquest before a jury was held at Surbiton Town Hall on Monday, 17 November 2019. No official report of it was discovered and it was not possible to analyse this primary source. However, the inquest was in *The Times* of 18 November 1919, *The Surrey Advertiser* of 19 November and *The Surrey Comet* of 22 November 1919. This summary mainly is based on the newspapers' reports.

The coroner was Dr M. H. Taylor, JP. Mr M. H. Tree, a barrister, represented the Alliance Aeroplane Company and Viscount Erleigh, a barrister, represented Napier & Son, the engine manufacturer. Viscount Erleigh, Gerald Rufus Isaacs, was the son of the distinguished Rufus Isaacs, the Marquis of Reading, who later became the Viceroy of India. Lieutenant Colonel Ridley represented the Headquarters of the Imperial Australian Forces [AIF]. Donald Easdale, the chief draftsman of the Alliance Aeroplane Company, had identified the bodies. Dr Pattison Armstrong, a police divisional surgeon, was attending patients nearby and went to the crash site immediately. He testified that Douglas must have been killed instantaneously and Ross, although still breathing when extracted from the wreckage, died almost immediately afterwards. The death certificates for each airman, issued after the inquest, stated that they were found dead in Marsh Lane, Surbiton, on 13 November 1919, and the address given for both was the Tavistock Hotel, Covent Garden, London. Post-mortem examinations had been carried out on each of them. Douglas was aged 25 and his cause of death was shock, fracture and dislocation of his spine and fracture of his skull. Ross was aged 24, and his cause of death was shock, fracture of his skull and laceration of his brain. For both airmen, an accidental death was attributed to the "collapse of an aeroplane".

Eye-witness accounts. The following postcodes are approximate and are given to aid orientation. Mr Frederick Dyke, observed from Kingston Market Place [KT1 IJP], that the tail of the aircraft was drooping, and in his opinion possibly it was too heavily laden, and the pilot was attempting to climb higher. He estimated the aircraft's height to be 750-1000 feet. Police Constable Money was cycling in Fassett Road, Kingston [KT1 2FE], when he heard an unusual sound of an aircraft engine which suddenly stopped at a height of about 500 feet. He reported that it appeared to slip sideways,

then recovered itself for a short distance before it dipped, turned sideways and crashed. Arthur Cyril Knipe, a mechanical engineer, observed the crash from Oil Mill Lane [KT1 3AR]. He thought it was flying at a height of about 700 feet when it dipped and ran for some distance before the pilot appeared to regain control of it and "flattened out". Then it began to revolve and near the ground the pilot again appeared to get it under control. The aircraft then disappeared behind some houses and Mr Knipe heard it crash. Mrs Evelyn Jones, observed from Cranes Drive, Surbiton [KT5 8AJ], that the machine emerged from thick mist with its engine shut off; it seemed to be gliding and then suddenly made a spinning nosedive to the ground. The pilot appeared to regain control of the machine without success. She had heard the engine before it was shut off and there was nothing abnormal about its sound. Mrs Jones probably was in the best position to see the aircraft crash because Cranes Drive is at a higher elevation than Surbiton Cemetery.

Condition of *Endeavour* & departure from Hounslow. James Peters, the aircraft's designer, testified that Douglas and Ross had seen it being built and had been flying it for several hours each day for about three weeks. They understood each detail of it and had been trained to repair it following every conceivable problem. The aircraft left Hounslow at 1133 hrs on Thursday, 13 November 1919, flying quite well after completing several circuits of the aerodrome. The crew had intended to leave at dawn, but the weather was not clear. It had been snowing, the sky was overcast, and when they left it was a bit misty. Peters reminded the inquest that in July 1919 the company's chief test pilot and himself flew a similar machine non-stop from London to Madrid. *Endeavour* was sent from Acton to Hounslow the previous afternoon, 12 November 1919. According to Peters, all the usual precautions were taken, tests were made before it was allowed to depart, and its total weight was less than the aircraft which he had flown on to Madrid. He testified that he had examined the wreck, found that every control cable and lever was connected correctly and in his view the engine was in perfect mechanical order.

Events before the crash. Peters testified after the eyewitness' accounts. He said it was possible for an aeroplane to come out of a cloud in a spin. The correct move for the pilot was to shut off the engine and push the nose of the machine down. As far as he could gather from the position of the controls on the wrecked machine, the pilot had pushed the nose down, but he was too close to the ground, either at 500 or 1000 feet, to recover his level. When in a thick cloud, an airman could see nothing- not even the

wing tips – he had no sense of horizon and could only fly by his instruments. Personally, he did not like to fly low. The aircraft and its instruments were designed for high flying. It was for the pilot to decide at what height to fly. Douglas, an exceptionally experienced pilot, was in command of the aircraft and his judgement had to be relied on. Peters repeated that the biggest danger of aviation was flying low and he reminded the inquest of his earlier record-braking non-stop flight to Madrid in an Alliance Seabird aircraft.

Questions permitted by the coroner. Lieutenant Burke, a friend of the deceased airmen, asked Peters whether there was any certification of the aircraft's readiness for the long trip when it left Acton. Peters' response was that the aircraft was ready for flying but not ready for the trip, because it was not loaded. The coroner then said that what mattered was to establish whether the aircraft was in good working and running order, as far as it could be determined from examination of the wreckage. Viscount Erleigh asked whether sometimes when in a cloud, it was impossible for airmen to tell whether they were the right way up and implied that atmospheric conditions were to blame for the crash. Lieutenant Burke then pointed out that when Douglas had tested the aircraft a fortnight ago, he had damaged the original chassis and thereafter it was fitted with a new chassis. Frederick Richard Draper, head of Napier's testing department, reported that the airmen told him that the machine was the best that they had ever flown in. It was in perfect order on the morning they went away. He had seen the engine that Monday morning when it was examined by the Air Ministry and everything inside was mechanically correct. The coroner read a report from Douglas to the Alliance company, dated 12 October 1919, it which he said that their aeroplane was far superior to any of the very many types that he had flown before. Moreover, in his view, the rigging, balance and observation were perfect, and added that, provided nothing unforeseen happened, he was confident about flying it to Australia.

Applications rejected by coroner. An unnamed man, a friend of one of the deceased airmen, wished to ask a question about the crashed aircraft. The coroner rejected his application. Another unnamed man, described as an aeronautical engineer who had in July 1919 inspected a similar aircraft which had come to grief, applied to make a point. The implication was that he had a connection with the Air Ministry but had no authority to speak for it. The coroner told the applicant said that he would have the opportunity to air his views through the press. Miss Mabel Desmond-Woolley, Lieutenant Douglas' fiancée, questioned the machine's fitness to fly to Australia, and

accused the coroner of neglecting his duty by not going deeper into the crash. The coroner told her that she had the right to refer the matter to the Lord Chancellor. The first-mentioned unnamed man interjected with the statement that not enough had been said about what happened between 30 October and 13 November 1919, and Miss Desmond-Woolley agreed with him. The coroner stated that inevitably there would be other enquiries, e.g., by the Air Ministry and the Australian authorities, at which their concerns could be raised. A coroner's task, he stated, was simply to ascertain the cause of death, i.e., was it accidental or otherwise, according to the legal principles.

Coroner's address to the jury & the verdict. The coroner said that he was willing to adjourn the inquiry if the jury required more evidence but would not be interrupted in his very difficult job. He said that Peters' view was that the cause of the accident was that the aeroplane came out of the cloud spinning and although the pilot did his best to level-off the machine, he was too close to the ground to achieve this. The verdict of the jury, declared by its foreman, Mr I. F. Palmer, was that in both cases death was due to accidental causes, for which no specific person was to blame. This was echoed in the death certificates.

MISS DESMOND-WOLLEY & THE INQUEST

Why was Miss Desmond-Woolley unhappy with the inquest? *The Sydney Telegraph*, on 22 November 1919, reported that a representative of the Australian Press Association had interviewed her. She was at Acton on 30 October 1919 when the aircraft made a bad landing and Douglas escaped with a slight injury to his hand. After that she saw him daily until the evening before his departure. She said that her fiancée seemed uneasy, whereas before 30 October he was full of confidence. Nevertheless, he regarded the aircraft, including its engine, as perfect and considered it to be the best that he had ever flown. He had watched subsequent repairs anxiously and these lasted until the eve of his departure. Miss Desmond-Woolley said that her fiancée was concerned that he must get away because he feared people jeering at his long delay. She felt that he may have departed against his better judgement, although he never voiced any doubts about the aircraft. She said that she was determined to press the Air Ministry for an enquiry whether the tests made before departure were adequate and was sure that Lieutenant Douglas would have flown higher if he could because he always favoured high flying.

REPORT IN *THE ADELAIDE REGISTER* NEWSPAPER

According to *The Register*, of 17 November 1919, an Australian Press Agency representative was one of the last to speak to the airmen at Hounslow. It is assumed that the newspaper's report was derived from this representative. *The Register* said that because of the late start, the airmen changed their plans and instead of flying non-stop to Brindisi in Italy, they were aiming for Dijon in France on the first leg of the journey to Australia. At Hounslow, snow had made the ground heavy, in contrast to the hard frost of the previous day, and *Endeavour* failed to take off cleanly. Even when it left the ground, the aircraft rose slowly, and it almost appeared that it would collide with the trees around the aerodrome. Twice it "sat still" when only a few hundred feet up and some of the onlookers questioned whether it was overloaded by the equipment and supplies that it carried. *The Register* then quoted a Mr. Seldey, reportedly an estate agent, who saw the accident, as saying that the aircraft was flying at 1,000 ft. at great speed. Everything seemed to be going quite smoothly. Then the engine stopped, and immediately the aircraft came to earth, turning round and round in a spinning nosedive. According to Seldey, when the aircraft had fallen to the height of the housetops, the pilot seemed to be attempting to regain control, but he was too late. While there was a terrible sound when it hit the ground, it was not true that the wreckage caught fire, although parts were saturated with petrol. *The Register* stated that Ross' body was picked up seven yards away from the wreckage and he must have been killed instantaneously. Police arrived and called for volunteers to remove the wreckage which covered Douglas. Then the doctor arrived. Douglas was alive when he was extracted from the wreckage, and he died a few minutes later. His wristwatch was still going, but his cigarette case was smashed. The stores from the aircraft were scattered over a wide radius. It was not clear whether the whole report could be attributed to Seldey, and he was not reported as an eyewitness at the inquest according to the newspaper accounts. Also, no persons with the surname *Seldey* were found in the 1911 Census of Surbiton in or in contemporaneous issues of *Kelly's Directory*, the *Surrey Comet* and *Surrey Advertiser* local newspapers.

THE FUNERALS

The Surrey Comet of 22 November 1919 reported that after the inquest the bodies of the airmen were taken from Surbiton mortuary to the headquarters of the Australian Imperial Forces in London. On 18 November, the bodies were taken by rail to Brookwood Cemetery, where burials took place with full military honours.

Representatives of the AIF and Air Ministry were present. A salute over the graves was fired by a party from the Australian Flying Corps, buglers sounded the “Last Post”, and many beautiful floral tributes had been sent. **Figures 3** and **4** are the gravestones respectively of Lieutenants Douglas and Ross in Brookwood Military Cemetery.

THE AIR COUNCIL’S ENQUIRY

The Air Council’s civil aviation accident report, No. C14, on aircraft Alliance P2, G-EAOX, was recorded as “missing” by the UK’s National Archives, Kew, as of January 2022; and it was not possible to analyse this primary source; in particular, to see what evidence was considered. However, *The Times* of 3 January 1920 reported the findings. The Air Council’s opinion was that the accident occurred when the aircraft was flying a straight course just below the clouds at a height of about 1,000 feet and that it went into a spin almost immediately after the engine was shut off at a height that did not allow the pilot to regain control before the aircraft hit the ground. The Times quoted the Air Council’s opinion that, “in view of the heavy loading and the aircraft’s comparatively low speed at which it was being flown, it was not unreasonable to assume that in shutting off his engine the pilot stalled the aircraft which then went into a spin and the possibility of the windows being closed and the outlook obscured by mist may have been an important factor in the pilot’s loss of control”. The Air Council could find no evidence of that faulty construction of the aircraft was the cause of the accident and its aerodynamic design was reasonably satisfactory. Moreover, according to *The Times*, that while the aircraft was heavily loaded, it was not unduly so, the same pilot had flown on a previous occasion with at least an equivalent weight on board and the machine had been tested the day before the accident.

THE INSURANCE CLAIM

The Alliance Aeroplane Company had insured *Endeavour* for £5,000 with the Union Insurance Society of Canton and made a claim in this amount after the aircraft crashed at Surbiton. It had crashed within a few minutes of expiration of the period for which the aircraft was insured. The insurers refused to pay, claiming that the flight which left Hounslow on 13 November 1919, and ended in disaster, was not covered because the aircraft was taking part in a race to Australia, whereas the policy only covered the preliminary trial flights of the aircraft. The Alliance Aeroplane Company then sued the insurers. On 14 December 1920, Mr Justice Bray gave judgement with costs in the King’s Bench Division, London, for the Union Insurance Society.[7]

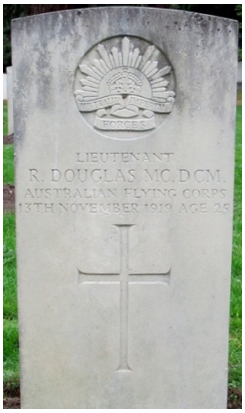

Figure 3. Gravestone of Lieut. Douglas in Brookwood Military Cemetery [IV.H.1] Photograph taken by David A. Kennedy, 15 October 2025.

Figure 4. Gravestone of Lieut. Ross in Brookwood Military Cemetery [IV.J.1]. Photograph taken by David A. Kennedy, 15 October 2025.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

According to the account in *The Adelaide Register* [above], when *Endeavour* departed from Hounslow aerodrome on 13 November 1919, the airmen aimed to make Dijon in France, a distance of about 400 miles as the crow flies, as the first stop in their journey to Australia. Why did the aircraft crash near Surbiton Cemetery just over five miles away from Hounslow as the crow flies? The only evidence available to address this important question was British and Australian newspaper accounts.

All newspaper accounts indicated that *Endeavour* got into difficulty as soon as it took off from Hounslow Aerodrome and this got progressively worse as it approached the site of the eventual crash in Lower Marsh Lane, Surbiton. Moreover, the account in *The Adelaide Register* [above] indicated that the airmen may have been attempting to return to Hounslow Aerodrome. Against this background, it can be conjectured that they were looking for a safe place to land and were aiming for the unbuilt area around Surbiton Cemetery. **Figure 5** is a section of a six-inch OS map published in 1935, which shows the area around Surbiton Cemetery. Location pins identify Fassett Road,

Kingston and Cranes Drive, Surbiton, where two of the eyewitnesses were situated, and Lower Marsh Lane.

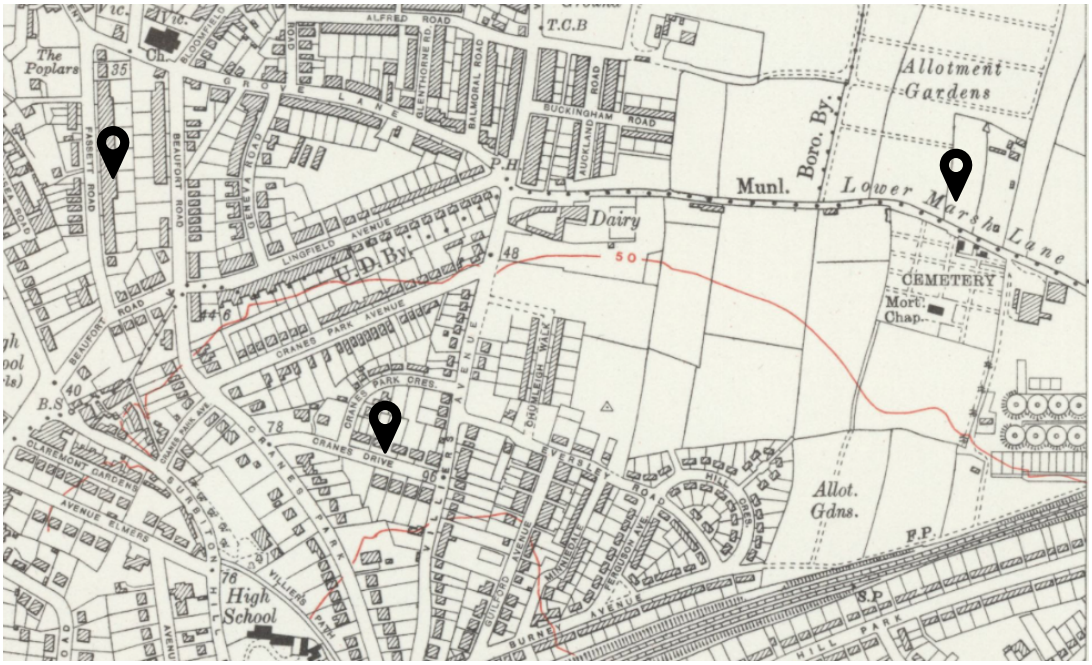

Figure 5. Section of Surrey, XII.NE, 6 inch/mile, published in 1935. Location pins mark Fassett Road, Cranes Drive & Lower Marsh Lane.

Why was the aircraft in difficulty? Newspapers varied in content and emphasis. Importantly, *The Times of London's* issue of 14 November 1919, was significantly misleading with its talk of an explosion that reduced the crashed aircraft to a "heap of smouldering debris". Nevertheless, taking all the newspaper reports together, overloading appeared to have been ruled out. *Endeavour* was considered airworthy by its designer, James Peters, when it took off from Hounslow Aerodrome on 13 November 1919, although major repairs, including installation of a new chassis, had been completed only the day before. He testified that the aircraft's control system was in proper order and Frederick Draper, head of Napier's testing department, testified that he had no concerns about the engine. The coroner seemed happy to rely on the opinions of Peters and Draper, who were both company men, and may have been influenced by the barristers representing the Alliance and Napier companies. The jury did not wish to see the inquest adjourned pending further expert enquiries and the reasonable concerns voiced by Mabel Desmond-Woolley, the pilot's fiancée and others were not addressed. It was difficult to dismiss the idea that the coroner wanted the inquest over and done with as quickly as possible.

However, there seemed to be no doubt that poor visibility, and low flying, was an important factor in the disaster. Indeed, in the *Times* report of the Air Council's enquiry, a key observation was that "…the possibility of the windows being closed and the outlook obscured by mist may have been an important factor in the pilot's loss of control." The KAHP's account noted that in *Endeavour* "the navigator sat in front of the pilot with the instruments and radio equipment before him, while the pilot sat behind him with a large steering wheel and had to put his head out of the triangular side windows to get any view forward". All this suggests that while the aircraft may have been designed for long-distance travel and high-flying, during take-off and landing, the pilot's forward vision was likely to have been impaired.

Furthermore, there appeared to be a sense of urgency to set off for Australia, after the serious delay caused by major repairs following the damage after the earlier mishap described as a "bad landing". Reputations were clearly at stake; namely those of the Alliance and Napier companies, that of Peters, the aircraft's designer and Douglas, the pilot. Moreover, Peters would have been very keen to share the prize of £10,000 – worth about £300,000 today - with his navigator, Ross, if they got to Australia within 30 days. Indeed, all these players would greatly benefit if the prize was secured. Accordingly, it can be assumed that all would have been prepared to take the risks involved. Overall, the situation could be likened to what could be seen as a "production imperative" in the light of more modern catastrophic failures, e.g., that of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in 1986, where urgency to complete a test on time was a significant factor.[8] Perhaps, in a much smaller way, the inquest also could be seen as a "production imperative".

AFTERMATH

What became of the Alliance Aeroplane Company and James Peters? The disaster of 13 November 1919 ended the company's aspirations to be a leading manufacturer of civil aircraft and the evidence suggested that it withdrew from the market in 1920.[9] According to James Bird, the grandson of Peters, his grandfather was so upset by the Surbiton disaster that he left the aircraft industry and began motorcycle design.[10] Peters motorcycles were manufactured from 1920 to 1925 by Peters Motors, which although it had an address in Ramsey, Isle of Man, were assembled on the UK mainland. They were offered under the banner "The Motorcycle of Practical Simplicity" and were of innovative design.[11] Graces Guide to British Industrial History reported that when he died, aged sixty, Peters was managing director of *Petbow Ltd*, a company

which made welding equipment. His probate record revealed that in 1953 he left an estate worth £22,808 including a property on the Isle of Man and a house in Hertfordshire called *Quatro Vientos*. This was the name of the airfield in Spain where he had landed after his epic non-stop flight from Hounslow in an Alliance Seabird prototype aircraft on 31 July 1919.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to staff of the Kingston History Centre for access to local newspapers David Hassard of the Kingston Aviation Heritage Project for a very informative discussion on early aircraft design and to Simon Kennedy for information about Peters motorcycles.

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[1] https://www.kingstonaviation.org/sopwith-day-by-day/1919-2/
[2] https://www.hhgera.com/2-acton-aerodrome
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