

NEW ZEALAND

H-Files: War hero's fatal flying-boat crash off Milford beach on Auckland's North Shore

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The wreck of the new Dornier Libelle flying-boat that crashed into the sea of Auckland's Milford beach in December 1929 killing both occupants. Photo / Herald archives

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Reporter

It was a flight that was never supposed to happen - and two people were killed.

On a summer's evening at Auckland's Milford beach, onlookers were horrified to see a three-seater flying-boat lose speed, turn to the right, spiral downwards and crash into the sea.

The new and unlicensed seaplane's two occupants, pilot Captain Donald Harkness, 34, and mechanic Charles Field, 38, drowned.

Harkness was an experienced pilot and a war hero, but he hadn't flown the seaplane, assembled only weeks earlier, prior to the fatal flight.

In World War I, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for a daring bombing raid near Brussels which set a massive German Zeppelin airship shed on fire.

There was evidence at an inquiry into the fatal flight to the North Shore that it resulted from an unintentional take-off when Harkness was really only planning to do taxiing tests on the Waitemata Harbour.

Auckland Weekly News photo spread on the 1929 fatal crash off Auckland's Milford beach. Inset are pilot Donald Harkness (left) and mechanic Charles Goldsbro, who both drowned in the wreck. From top left, the plane before the crash, members of the rescue party, the large crowd around a Moth plane whose pilot landed on the beach to help, hauling the wreck ashore after nightfall, and the wreck on the beach. Source: Auckland Libraries.

Witnesses heard explosions like back-firing from the engine as the small plane plummeted at around 5.30pm on Thursday, December 12, 1929, several hundred metres from shore.

A man on the beach looking through binoculars saw a hand of one of the occupants reach up from within the still-floating wreckage.

"The effort was apparently fruitless," the *Herald* reported, "for, although he tried for several moments to extricate himself, he sank back and disappeared as the hull subsided."

People quickly rowed out to the crash site in small boats. Two members of a life-saving team swam out and dived under the wreck, trying, unsuccessfully, to release the one man they could see.

Once it was clear the occupant or occupants couldn't be released, a life-saving line was attached to the tail in a failed attempt to tow the sinking machine to shore.

The same evening, an Auckland Harbour Board launch dragged up the wreck and towed it to near the shore, from where it was hauled by rope on to the beach by some of the by now hundreds of onlookers.

One end of the propeller had snapped off and the nose of the metal-hull machine had been pushed back on to the open-top cockpit, locking the two men in place. A boulder, estimated to weigh about 23kg, was found wedged between them.

The single-engine Dornier Libelle flying-boat, assembled in Auckland, had suffered from teething troubles.

Built to carry a pilot and two passengers, it was destined for air taxi work for Aerial Services Ltd, a company registered shortly before the crash by Harkness family members and several others.

While going through pre-licensing tests, some of the plane's instruments didn't work properly, there was a collision with a moored boat in the harbour, and the engine had difficulty spinning fast enough because of difficulties with the petrol pump. The plane couldn't carry a full load and an auxiliary petrol system was installed.

Captain W. Mann, who took the plane on test flights, said it was airworthy when he flew it the day before the fatal crash, but it had never run at full efficiency.

He believed Harkness, a careful pilot, hadn't intended to get the plane airborne.

"Captain Harkness was a very level-headed man, fully appreciating that a flying-boat required different handling from that of an aeroplane, and I am convinced that he had no intention of flying when he took the machine out on Thursday.

"He would have discussed it with me if he had any plans regarding flying the machine. Mrs Harkness is also convinced that he did not intend to fly."

Mann surmised that stones were put in the plane to provide ballast for taxiing tests. The engine spun faster than expected and the plane lifted off the water. A side wind was blowing,

so once in the air, Harkness would have been committed to flying until he could find a good landing place.

Mann thought the machine might have become tail-heavy when flying down-wind with a failing engine, so to increase the engine speed Harkness might have switched from one petrol system to the other.

"While the mechanic was trying to throw out the stone the machine may have stalled and gone into a spin."

The bombing of a German airship shed

During World War I, Donald Harkness circled his warplane above a huge German Zeppelin airship shed in Belgium, watching it burn from the direct hits of British bombs.

A member of the Royal Naval Air Service, Harkness was in the air and on the way to his targets near Brussels before dawn on August 2, 1916, the middle of World War I.

"All the time, I kept a sharp look-out for Zeps, but saw none," Harkness, originally from Nelson, wrote home.

Germany used airships to bomb London and Paris, and for naval reconnaissance.

"Collet [another flyer] had already started to glide down lower, and I soon lost sight of him," Harkness wrote. "Later I did the same, and when at a height of about 9000 ft [2743m] and nearly over the great Zep shed at Evere, found myself watching a wonderful panorama below."

He saw some of Collet's bombs burst on the shed, followed by "huge rolls of smoke from the far end.

"I glided straight across the shed below, a huge one it was without a doubt, for I felt I could hardly miss it."

With anti-aircraft shells bursting around his plane, Harkness dropped eight bombs.

"The shells came up thicker than ever, but I was determined to see what happened to my bombs. Turning round steeply I looked down, and suddenly saw a big flash and a cloud of black smoke on one side of the shed and then on the other.

"All my eight bombs had fallen as if by magic straight across the middle of the shed, and three penetrated it, for immediately the quantity of smoke pouring out was trebled, and the whole building was afire."

In a later raid, Harkness' plane was shot and the engine damaged by anti-aircraft fire. Slightly injured, he landed in the Netherlands and was interned.