



## THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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### **Bro. DOUGLAS SWAIN, DFC. WARTIME PILOT AND MANAGER, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD FLYING SERVICES**

#### **Ghost of the past finally laid to rest.**

The following item appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2007. It has taken him more than 50 years of looking, wondering and waiting but on a remote ridge high on the Barrington Tops Richard Swain has finally come to terms with the life and death of the father he never knew.

He and his sister, Susanne Rose, yesterday unveiled a commemorative plaque on the hillside where their father, Douglas, died in an aircraft crash.

"I know it's an overworked word ...this is some sort of closure, though". Mr Swain said.

Richard was four and his mother was pregnant with Susanne when Captain Swain, his co-pilot and a passenger went missing on the afternoon of September 24, 1954. They were on a regular "milk run" from Mascot in a Lockheed Hudson owned by the Herald delivering newspapers to Taree, Kempsey, Armidale, Glen Innes, Inverell and Bingarra. An intensive land and air search of rugged bush country north of Dungog failed to find the plane, call sign VH-SML. It was not until 15 months later that the crew of a Butler Heron flying over the Tops finally spotted something, presumed metallic, glistening below in the bright sunlight.

Within 24 hours a police party, guided by a civilian pilot in a Tiger Moth, found the wreck at almost 900 metres on the Mountaineer Range near Wangai 40 kilometres from Dungog. The bodies of the three men-Swain, of Dee Why, Alistair Cole-Milne, of Neutral Bay and David Burns of Hawthorn, Victoria-were removed; inquests, funerals, air crash inquiries held.

Of the crash, Richard Swain, his brother and sisters were told nothing. "I don't remember precisely when we found out," he says. Of his father, who was 37, at the time he has no recollection. "My personal memories of him, his face, are from photographs".

Though he had appeared in the newspapers at the time bravely celebrating his fifth birthday as the search for his father wound down, he was quietly packed off to a Baulkham Hills boarding school. "We didn't even go to the funeral. It was a generation thing, I suppose. We lived in an age when.....such matters were quickly pushed out of the way and everybody moved on.

Decades passed. The crash site was reclaimed by the bush. His mother remarried. A sister emigrated. A brother died in a motor cycle accident. Mr Swain, now 57, ran away to sea, joined the Merchant Navy, ran a pilotage company. But he never forgot his father or his fatal accident, "I always wanted to know more. I would start then get distracted." Five years ago, following a stroke, he suddenly found time on his hands. He began studying official reports, combing newspaper cuttings, talking to his late father's friends, trying to relocate the crash site to recover a life lost.

He learnt that the aircraft had crashed in heavy rain, obscured by mist. A friend, John Laming, says VH-SML's last movements were probably comparable to "overtaking on a blind corner and hoping no one's there".

Commercial pressures to deliver newspapers on time-a risky venture involving low flying "drops" through a hatch in the fuselage, or rapid ground handovers-were immense. Three other fleet aircraft crashed.

The inquiry hinted at paperwork anomalies and technical troubles. Whatever the reasons, the aircraft "ploughed into the mountain from the South, cutting a swathe nearly 50 feet (15 metres) wide through the heavy timber.

"Wreckage was strewn over 100 yards (90 metres). About twenty trees, some of them up to two feet in girth had been sliced cleanly through".

In March 2007 Mr. Swain drove to the Barrington Tops in search of the site. With the help of a parks ranger, Peter Beard, local experts and forestry workers, they eventually found it in dense forest.

"We went back for a bit of a trek, poked around, disappeared in the scrub. Came back out. Had another go. It was hard going but, suddenly-bang-there it was. Unbelievable. "Bits of the plane are still there .You can feel its oil sticky on your hands."

And what of Captain Swain? His son's research reveals a brave, handsome man, a turner and fitter who went to England, flew Mosquitos and Anson reconnaissance planes in World War 11 and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Mike Byron, who was Swain's navigator during the war, wrote from England that he was, "heroic, generous, quick to laughter, quick to anger.....but never mean or vindictive. Mr Swain and his sister say there are still gaps in the short life of their father. "I just wish my mother could have sat down and gone it all through with me", he says.

On return to Australia, Swain became manager and Chief Pilot of the Herald Flying Services fleet of Lockheed Hudsons and Dakota DC.3s.

A ceremony was conducted at 2.50 pm, September 14, the precise time of the crash according to a watch that stopped on impact and was later found in the wreckage. It was an emotional and tearful occasion.

"I feel a huge sense of achievement." Mr Swain says.

"After all these years it was so important for me to know it was a job well done."

"Mission accomplished."

Douglas Hereward Swain was initiated, passed and raised in Lodge Port Phillip, No 267, Victorian Constitution, on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 24<sup>th</sup> May and 26<sup>th</sup> July 1930. He called off on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1948 and affiliated with Lodge Camden, UGL of NSW & ACT on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1949.

Three children, Richard Alexander Swain, born 21<sup>st</sup> September 1949; Gayle Dorothy Swain, born 26<sup>th</sup> December 1942; and Douglas Robert Swain, born 5<sup>th</sup> March 1947, enrolled at the William Thompson Masonic Schools on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1955. Gayle left on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1958 with a placement at Grace Bros Broadway. Richard and Douglas left on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1960 when their mother remarried.

:Ref: John Huxley, Sydney Morning Herald 15th September 2007

Records of UGL of NSW & ACT

Records of GL of Victoria

