

WWDHS NEWSLETTER No. 447 April – June 2021

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April Meetings will be held at the Historic Council Chambers (HCC)

Committee meeting: 1.30 pm

General Meeting: 2.30 p.m.

Speakers:

19th April: Luke Grealy, Manager of the Museum of the Riverina, will be talking about Peter Batey who founded the Bald Archy Prize in 1994.

17th May: Colonel Jim Hammett, the new Commandant at 1RTB Kapooka

EXCURSION TO BETHUNGA, Friday 9 April 2021

Geoff Haddon has organised our first excursion since the Covid 19 restrictions were relaxed. The bus will be leaving from the old Masters carpark on Hammond Avenue at **10 am.** We plan to view the Bethungra Spiral and visit the Bethungra Dam [which was built in the 1890s]. We also hope to have a look at Engine 3801 which is supposed to be running between Cootamundra and Junee on that day. Geoff Haddon will be providing a running commentary as we travel around. We will be having lunch at the Bethungra School House. Each person will be able to order their choice from the menu and pay for their own order. Prices are reasonable (between \$10 and \$20). If you are interested please contact Geoff Burch 0417277592 or geoffrey.burch@bigpond.com

WWDHS Patron: Michael McCormack, Deputy Prime Minister

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BETHUNGRA



Left: The Bethungra Rail Spiral is a heritage listed spiral near Bethungra, between Junee and Cootamunda, on the Melbourne-Sydney railway line. While the down line takes a fairly direct route, the up line is built on a more gentle grade and doubles back on itself to form a spiral loop. It was listed as a heritage item on the NSW State Heritage Register on 2 April 1999.

Photograph supplied by Margaret Hill.

Right: The 3801, the famous steam locomotive which was operated by NSW Railways between 1943 and 1974. Here it is seen crossing the Bargo River Bridge. Recently, after extensive restoration work, it was relaunched at Sydney Central Station on 12 March 2021 by the Governor of NSW, Margaret Beazley.



Left: The Olde School T-house (the former Bethungra School House). As well as serving delicious coffees, teas and tasty treats, it sells local products, for example jams, chutneys and hand-made gifts. It also has a room to display historical items, including items from the old school.



Bethungra has many well-kept old buildings including the Shirley Hotel (above left) and St Augustine's Anglican Church (above right).

WWDHS COMMITTEE NEWS

- The committee resolved to allocate the \$10,500 raised from the sale of deaccessioned items to the conservation of some of the important items in the collection of Museum of the Riverina.
- The committee resolved to proceed in stages with the digitation of the Wagga Wagga Rate Books (microfiche records which are held by CSU Regional Archives) and to work collectively with State Archives to make these records available on line on the State Archives website. The first stage will be from 1870 to 1908.
- At the suggestion of our President, Geoff Burch, the State Library has agreed to digitise the Gormly Indexes (which they hold) and make these available on line. It will probably take at least three months to complete. These records are a wonderful resource as they contain a lot of information on the early history of Wagga Wagga.

WAGGA WAGGA ANTIQUE SOCIETY MEETINGS, 2021

The Antique Society usually meets at the ARCC Hall, 131 Tarcutta Street on the third Friday of the Month 0429 125 752.

- April 23: The Superb Collection of Lithgow Pottery
- May 21: Kathy Gaffney and Joanne McLennan will show how the trends of household linens have aligned with fashion, building and social changes since the 1900s.

On Saturday 19 June the Antique Society will be having an excursion to explore the fascinating vintage shops and delicious food of Coolamon.

VALE HELEN BUCHANAN

Helen Buchanan, a member of the Wagga Wagga Antique Society, was well-known to many members of our Historical Society. Helen came to Wagga Wagga in 1970. She was an enthusiastic teacher at Wagga Wagga High School for 15 years.

After she retired, she volunteered for Meals on Wheels and served in his role for 35 years, retiring in 2019. She was also a member of several groups in Wagga Wagga including the Australian Decorative and Fine Arts Society and the Antique Society. She was Wagga Wagga's Citizen of the Year in 2007. She died in January this year at the age of 90. RIP.



THE REMARKABLE PICK-A-BACK LANDING

By Sherry Morris

On 29 September 1940 two Avro Anson planes, each flown by a trainee pilot, collided in mid-air at 1000 feet (about 305 metres) near Brocklesby and became firmly attached in a pick-a-back (or piggy-back) style. Leading Aircraftsman (LAC) Leonard Graham Fuller, known as 'Len', was immediately faced with the decision of either baling out of the plane or attempting to land it without endangering the lives of others.

Len Fuller and family

Len Fuller had been born in Cootamundra on 9 August 1918. According to his father, William Edward Fuller, Len was a normal high-spirited boy, mad on pulling engines apart and putting them together and like all youngsters he loved cars and he had been interested in planes since he was a young child.

The Fuller family were described in the *Australian Women's Weekly* in October 1940 as 'the fighting Fullers'. Len's father, an Englishman, had been a member of the Surrey Yeomanry before he had emigrated to Australia in 1903. He had served in the Australian Infantry Forces (AIF) in New Guinea during the First World War and, in 1940, he was a welfare officer with a garrison battalion at the Sydney Showground camp. Len's mother, Daisy May, had flown in old planes and enjoyed travelling with her head out the window and she had even experienced looping the loop. During the war she was a regular voluntary worker and a member of the Women's Australian National Service (WANS) and the British Israel Comforts Fund. Len's 19-year-old brother, Colin, was a gunner in the first contingent of the AIF and was serving in Egypt. His brother Nigel had tried to enlist but had been rejected because of faulty eyesight. His aunt, Mrs Roddick, although over 50 years of age, was driving an ARP ambulance in London and her son was in the Royal Air Force (RAF). Len's Uncle Leonard (after whom he was named) was a flight attendant in the previous war and had died in a freak landing at Arras in France behind enemy lines. When the Fuller family were living in Cootamundra, they often welcomed planes which landed in a paddock near their home; and it was largely due to the family that an aerodrome was constructed in Cootamundra.

The family later moved to Bondi. The three boys were keen surfers and received many awards for athletics, swimming and boxing.¹

Len had fair complexion, brown eyes and fair hair and was almost 5'11" high. He had attended the Sydney Grammar School, obtained an A licence at a civilian flying school and had been working as a car salesman.

Len had been in the RAAF for about five months when the incident occurred.

Leonard Graham Fuller

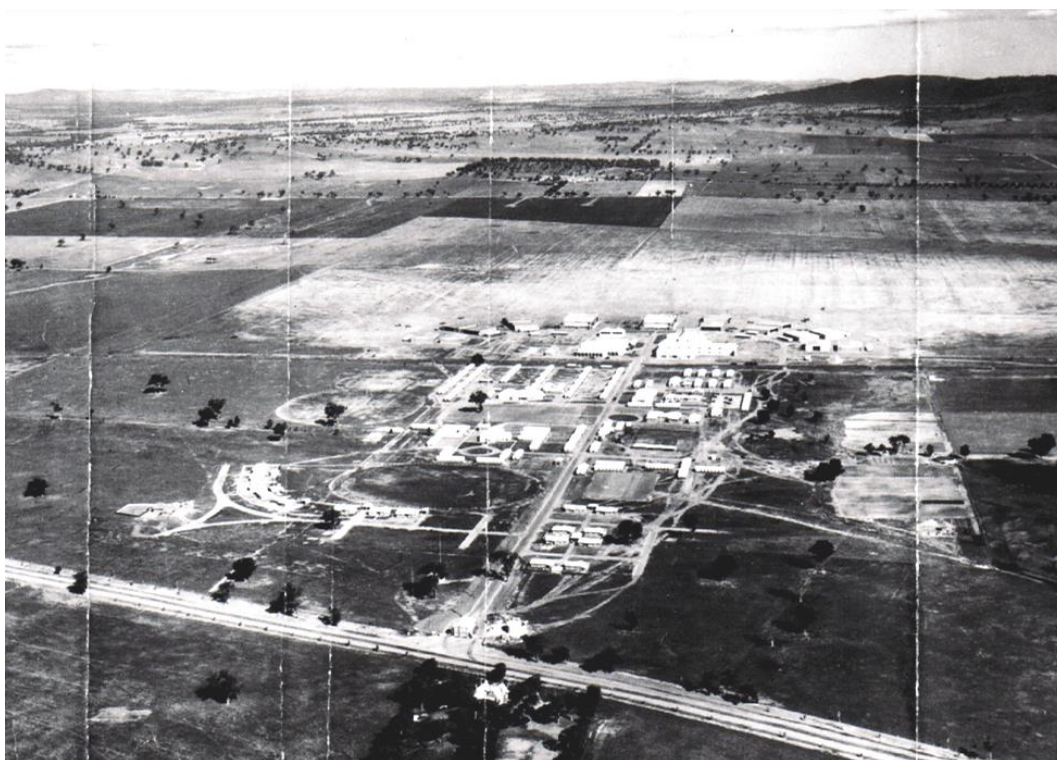


The Three Companions

His three companions during the incident were LAC John Inglis ('Jack') Hewson, Ian Menzies Sinclair and Hugh Gavin (often known as 'Gavin') Fraser. Jack, born in Newcastle, was only 18 years old and had been in the Senior Cadet Corps. He had a dark complexion, brown eyes and black hair and was 5'8" tall. He was a quiet, retiring and introspective young man and had been working as an advertising draftsman. Ian Sinclair had been born in Glen Innes on Christmas Day 1913. He had hazel eyes, brown hair and was 5'9" high. It was recorded that he always carried out his duties with keenness and ability. He had above average sense of judgement and was very reliable. Hugh Gavin Fraser was a Victorian, born in Melbourne on 9 April 1913. His brothers, Harris and Charlie were already training in Rhodesia under the Empire Air Scheme. He had fair complexion, blue eyes and brown hair and had been an accountant.



The four men all enlisted on 29 April 1940 and did their basic training at Mascot. On 29 July 1940, the four mates were transferred to No. 2 Flying Training School (SFTS), based at the RAAF Station in Forest Hill, Wagga Wagga. This was one of several pilot training facilities at the beginning of the Second World War as part of Australia's contribution to the Empire Air Training Scheme. Here they were taught what they needed to be operational pilots. This included instrument flying, night flying, cross country navigation, formation flying, dive bombing and gunnery.²



*Aerial view of Forest Hill RAAF Base in the early 1940s
The front gate is at the bottom of the photograph.*

When the four friends arrived at No. 2 Flying Training School, it was still being established and buildings were still being constructed. Brick structures had been planned for such basic requirements as sick quarters, a guard room (the first building completed), two main hangars, a boiler house and an emergency powerhouse. Because of the defence needs after the outbreak of war, it was decided to modify the plans and use semi-permanent types of buildings to enable the quickest possible use to be made of the base. Number 2 Service Flying Training School had been formed on 1 July 1940 and the first course, which was attended by the four friends, commenced on 29 July 1940. The RAAF Ensign was hoisted over the Base for the first time on that date. At that time there were 29 officers and 27 airmen. By 31 July 1940, this had grown to 37 officers and 366 airmen. The Wing Commander was F. R. W. Scherger.



Headquarters building (on the right) under construction

29 September 1940

Two months later, on 29 September 1940, the four aircraftsmen left in two of the school's Avro Ansons for a cross country training exercise to Corowa and Narrandera and were then to return to their base. Len Fuller was the pilot in one plane with Ian Sinclair as navigator. Jack Hewson was the pilot in the other Anson with Fraser as navigator.

When they arrived over Brocklesby (near Albury), during a banking move, Len lost sight of the other plane which was underneath him and the two collided at an altitude of about 1000 feet (about 300 metres). Len heard a 'grinding crash and a bang as roaring propellers struck each other and bit into the engine cowlings'. The two planes were jammed together and the turret on the lower Anson was wedged into the other plane's port wing root while its fin and rudder were balancing the upper plane's port tailplane. Len later described how he had flown the two interlocked planes with the engines of the lower plane and the controls of the top plane, over the phone to the *Daily News*, a Perth newspaper:

It happened so quickly that I hardly had time to register it. The planes seemed to come together, mine on top, and there was a grinding crash and a bang bang bang as roaring propellers struck each other and bit into the engine cowlings. It was a terrific bump, and I would have been tossed right out of my seat and away from the controls if I hadn't had my safety belt on.

When the first shock had passed, I found the planes still flying in a sort of way and thought I might have just a chance to get them down in one piece.

I thought that if I gave up and baled out they'd crash on Brocklesby and kill probably several people. So I decided to 'give it a go'. I knew I had a slight chance.

The planes remained joined together in 'pick-a-back' style with the impact of the top machine crushing the cockpit of the lower, leaving the landing gear untouched and the engine still running full throttle. The two planes flew on the engines of the lower machine while Len worked the controls of the top plane.

Len Fuller insisted that his observer, Ian Sinclair, had to bale out so he would not be killed if the planes crashed. The two men in the other plane, LAC Jack Hewson and LAC Gavin Fraser also parachuted out. Fortunately, Hewson had increased his engines to full power immediately after the collision and locked his controls when the two aircraft came together. This prevented the plane from spiralling out of control with the weight. When the collision occurred, Jack was not wearing his parachute and Gavin had to pass it through the wreckage of the cockpit. Jack then sat on the floor to put on the parachute while the aircraft was losing height. He then climbed out through the broken perplex onto the starboard wing and slid off at about 900 feet. Unfortunately, he had not clipped it on properly and it became tangled and he ended up upside down. The chute eventually opened fully at 100 feet but he slammed into the ground so hard that his spine jarred and for a while he was paralysed.

In the meantime, Len Fuller managed to fly both aircraft about five miles (eight kilometres) using the power from his starboard engine. He recalled:

Both engines of the lower plane were turning at a good bat, and it was these that kept the double craft in the air. I flew the freak combination by the controls of the top plane only.

Len added that he had looked over the side and had seen that the cabin of the underneath plane had been crushed and he began to worry about the pilot, Jack Hewson. To his immense relief, he then saw him crawl out of the cabin ready to jump. He watched him slip away safely and then returned to concentrating on keeping the 'freak combination' 'in the air because it was then 'lumping along like a brick'. When the lower plane's motors started losing revolutions, the double planes became harder to handle. He had planned to land in a paddock he knew was safe but when the engines on the lower plane began to fail, he decided to land as soon as possible. When he saw a paddock, he made an emergency crash landing in pick-a-back style. He described the landing:

The engines were hardly going so I cut the switches at 500 feet. The motors of the lower plane were just idling. We glided in like an elephant and I worked out how I'd land. We were sinking so fast that I knew I'd have to level out for a landing sooner than usual. Then I tried to pull the stick back and it was so difficult that I just about had to stand up on the rudder bar and heave back with all my might.

The planes glided in and about 10 to 20 feet up they stalled. It wasn't a pancake – the wheels of my plane protruded below the bottom of the other one just sufficiently to run along the

surface. Surprisingly there was little bump when they settled. She must have run about 200 yards, almost a normal landing run. The planes veered to the left but I had no chance of stopping that. Then I just hopped out. I heaved a huge sigh of relief... and it was a very large sigh, I can tell you.

The remarkable landing was reported all over the world and featured in the news bulletins of most of the overseas broadcasting stations including the BBC and stations at San Francisco, Manila and Java. Len Fuller was praised for saving the aircraft and avoiding possible damage to the Brocklesby community. Both Ansons were repaired and the top plane was returned to flight service.

The Air Board had to determine why the two aircraft were so close to each other while on a reconnaissance but could not determine which pilot was at fault. One Air Force officer who examined the locked plane said he believed that they could not have been more skilfully joined together on the ground with a hoist. He felt that the glide to the ground after the collision the centre of gravity of the two machines must have been nearly perfect.³



Two views of the interlocked Avro Anson planes after they landed



Avro Anson planes firmly attached after they collided in the air



Right: The smashed cockpit on the lower plane after the plane on top was removed.

Aftermath

Jack Hewson, the only person to be injured in the accident, was treated for his back injury at the Albury District Hospital. A German doctor named Hertz was responsible for repairing the damage. It was four months before he returned to active duty. Jack graduated from No 2 SFTS in October 1940. He continued flying until November 1945 and finished as a C-47 skipper with 38 Squadron and had nearly 2500 flying hours. He was a flight lieutenant when he was discharged from the Royal Australian Air Force in 1946.

Ian Sinclair was awarded a Pilot's Flying Badge on 21 October 1940. He was transferred to the United Kingdom in February 1941 and was in charge of a Wellington crew of five men. He was discharged in July 1942 on being appointed to a commission in the Air Ministry where he was the officer in charge of the RAF officers' records from 1942 to May 1944. He was also a flight lieutenant when he was discharged in 1945. He returned to Glen Innes and became a grazier. He died on 19 April 1959.

Gavin Fraser was posted to Britain and flew as a pilot officer with No 206 Squadron in the RAF based in Aldergrove in Northern Ireland. He and his crew of three died on 1 January 1942 during a routine training flight when their Lockheed Hudson collided with a tree.

Len Fuller was promoted to sergeant although he was confined to barracks for a fortnight and forfeited seven days' active pay for notifying newspapers about the incident without authorisation. He too graduated from No 2 SFTS in October 1940. He also received a commendation from the Australian Air Board for his 'presence of mind, courage and determination in landing the pick-a-back Ansons without serious damage to the aircraft under difficult conditions'. He later served in the Middle East and Europe with No 37 Squadron RAF. He was awarded a Distinguished Flying Medal for gallantry in air operations in Palermo (Sicily, southern Italy) in March 1942. According to his citation:

One night in March 1942, this airman was captain of an aircraft which participated in an attack on Palermo when two enemy vessels of 6000 tons were sunk, another severely damaged and much destruction was caused to harbour installations. Having set one of the enemy vessels on fire, this airman flew back to his base for his aircraft to be refuelled and rearmed. Then he returned to the target and after making a second attack on the ships, remained over the area for some time in order to prevent fire-fighting parties from working.



He was commissioned later that year and posted back to Australia as a flying officer. He became an instructor at No 1 Operational Training Unit in Sale, Victoria. In September 1943, he married Thelma Cockerill at St James Church, King Street, Sydney (pictured left). He died near Sale on 18 March 1944 when he was hit by a motor bus on Heart Road, East Sale, while riding a bicycle. He was buried at the Sale War Cemetery.

Len and Thelma Fuller

Sergeant Len Fuller in London in 1941 with the Australian High Commissioner, Stanley Bruce, later a Prime Minister of Australia



The mid-air collision and Len Fuller's skill to steer the plane away from the town to a paddock was a remarkable feat and Brocklesby's main claim to fame. It occurred on Sunday morning 29 September 1940, when many families were on their way to church and many were amazed to see the parachutes land (as most had never even seen a parachute before). The story was featured in headlines in newspapers all over the world.⁴



Article in the Australian Women's Weekly, 12 October 1940, 'Len has done something magnificent', a telephone message that told Daisy Fuller of her son's courage in the Pick-a-back plane landing. The photographs include from left to right, Len Fuller, a street snapshot of Len and his brother Colin in Egypt, Len Fuller and Len's parents, Daisy and William Fuller. In the centre is an artist's impression of the two planes locked together in the freak accident when Fuller landed them.



Brocklesby Memorial commemorating Len Fuller's pick-a-back landing in 1940 on the Howlong/Goombargana Road.

Memorials Commemorating Len Fuller's amazing feat in 1940

In 1990, Tim Fischer, the National Party's leader, unveiled a plaque near Brocklesby on Howlong to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the remarkable landing. He was accompanied by the president of the Brocklesby Committee which arranged the commemoration. The plaque included the words:

Two hundred metres beyond this point,
L.A.C. LEONARD GRAHAM FULLER
successfully crash landed the two Avro Anson aircraft
that locked together after a mid-air collision
over Brocklesby on 29 September 1940.
The three other airmen who parachuted to safety were
L.A.C. John I. Hewson, L.A.C. Ian M. Sinclair,
and L.A.C. Hugh G. Fraser.

This plaque was unveiled on 29.9.1990,
marking the 50th anniversary of the event by
MR TIM FISCHER
Federal Member for Farrer
and leader of the National Party,

About 2000 people attended including Charles Fraser, Hugh Gavin Fraser's brother, and Len Fuller's brother, Col Fuller. Another memorial is located in a park in Brocklesby, The site includes a part of an engine and interpretative signage.

This amazing feat is still regarded as one of the most outstanding in world aviation history and one without precedent.



Memorial in Brocklesby

¹ *Australian Women's Weekly*, 12 October 1940.

² National Archives of Australia, World War II military records of Leonard Graham Fuller, Ian Menzies Sinclair, John Inglis Hewson and Hugh Gavin Fraser.

³ *Daily News* (Perth, Western Australia), 2 October 1940; *Daily Advertiser*, Wagga Wagga, NSW, 2 October 1940; *Daily Advertiser*, 30 June 1990.

⁴ National Archives of Australia, World War II military records of Fuller, Sinclair, Hewson and Fraser; *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 1943 (wedding).