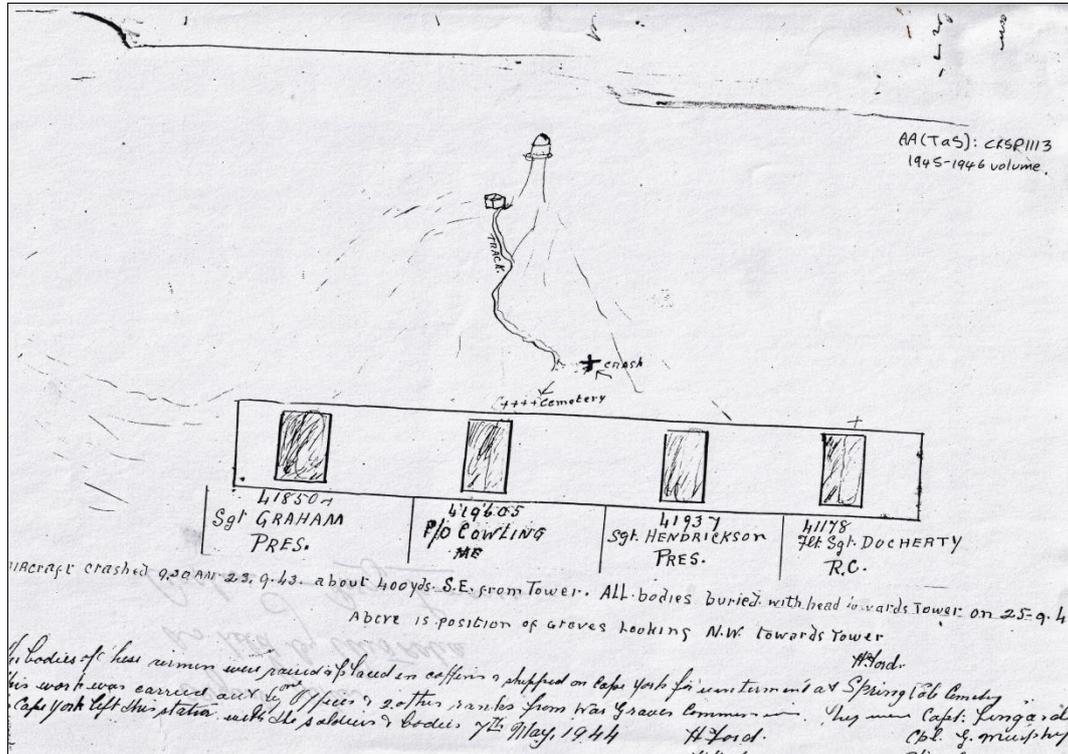


# DEAL ISLAND WAR TIME CRASH IN BASS STRAIT

by

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Sketch by Henry Ford, Lighthouse Keeper on Deal Island\*

An intriguing tale of war time activity over the skies of Bass Strait during WWII deals with the crash of a RAAF Oxford A25 aircraft killing all four crew.

On the morning of September 23, 1943, just after 9:30am the men aboard the craft left East Sale in Victoria to participate in an anti-submarine exercise over Bass Strait. It carried the crew of four with Flight Sergeant Joseph Docherty in charge.

The craft headed towards the remote, rugged and small island of Deal Island north Bass Strait closer to the coast of Victoria than to Tasmania. The skies were clear and its progress was watched by Deal Island Acting Head Lighthouse keeper, Henry Ford, who watched it keenly. Then, to his horror and for no apparent reason, it did three or four rolls, straightened out and dived at an acute angle from 1000 feet into the granite cliffs of the island. All four crewmen were killed instantly.



Deal Island Lighthouse. It is no longer manned.

Ford ran to the scene only to see devastation, hoping to find survivors but only to find tragedy with one body pinned under the craft while another was a few yards clear. Another two bodies were found.

Returning to the lighthouse he contacted by radio with the help of his daughter, Aileen, the authorities at Wilsons Promontory. He received the advice that in view of the inaccessible nature of the site the men were to be buried on the island. This is what Ford with his fellow lighthouse keeper Mr Munro and accompanied by two RAAF Chaplains did. Later Ford drew a sketch of the place.

Those who died and were buried were:

- Sergeant Norman Graham, 22.
- Flight Sergeant Joseph Docherty, 30
- Pilot Officer, Kenneth Cowling, 19.
- Leading aircraftman and gunner, Peter Hendrickson, 21.



Reg with the remaining engine of the aircraft

The bodies remained on the island for nearly eight months when an RAAF officer and two other men in March 1944 from the War Graves Commission sailed to the island and raised the bodies. The vessel *Cape York* took them to Victoria where finally they were placed in coffins and reburied on June 8, 1944 at Springvale War Cemetery.

The cause of the crash has never been fully ascertained. The official Preliminary Report states "*Probable cause unknown.*" It is now believed by the Department of Defence that the probable cause was the craft being forced down by violent air currents. The true cause, however, remains a mystery known only to the four who manned her.

Some years ago, I was able to go to Deal Island, the most interesting place I have ever visited. The caretaker at the time took me to the crash site, where wreckage of the craft still remains, scattered and rusted. Crosses, in memory of those who were killed and where originally buried, mark the spot.



Deal Island

Deal Island is the major island of the Kent Group. It is nearly four miles long in north-south direction just slightly smaller east-west. It rises to nearly 1000 feet with spectacular granite cliffs and has a number of delightful secluded coves. To the west and separated by strong tidal waters of Murray Pass, are the other islands of the group, Erith and Dover.

Deal Island is now looked after by volunteer rangers (2022). There is an interesting small museum on the island.

It was fascinating to say the least, having known and written on the story decades before and to actually visit the scene and view the remains of the craft. It was an amazing experience. They were all so young.

\*The original sketch is with the Australian Archives, Hobart.