

THE UIVER AT ALBURY

Edited talk by Doug Royal with assistance from Noel Jackling (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, October 2014 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 551)

Seven weeks after the discovery of the Pyjama girl's murdered body out along the Howlong Road, the Uiver landed in the infield of the Albury Racecourse at 1.17 am on a Wednesday morning, October 24, 1934. As though by divine providence the demoralised Albury citizens now had an act of salvation to perform. They did and spirits were raised.

Noel Jackling and I have reviewed many different accounts of what happened during those eight and a half hours that the Uiver was within our bounds. Some citizens who were there said the plane was pulled from the swampy ground, dragged onto the course proper and then took off in a southerly direction over the Hume Weir from the track. Others said that the Uiver remained on the infield and took off to the north along the same path that on which it had landed. Another unusual story claimed there was gold carried in the cargo. Our research has showed us that around the 70 year mark after an event, memories have faded or been fictionalised and fabricated. Records have been lost, photographs have no captions and most of the observers at the event have passed on.

While debating the differences between fact and fiction, fabrication and fidelity there can be no argument that the stars of the show were the plane and the seven passengers. The Uiver was a remarkable aircraft of its time, made of aluminium and powered by two nine cylinder orbital motors. The plane had reinforced fuselage near the propellers so that when ice formed on them and spun off, it didn't damage the fuselage. Also, heated air was circulated from a baffle surrounding the exhaust pipe and



fed to the carburettors so the plane could fly at high altitude in very cold temperatures. The cruising speed was 200 miles per hour. The Uiver nearly won the race despite not carrying extra fuel tanks. Because of their high fuel consumption they made many more stops than the other planes: Rome, Cairo, Baghdad, yet at the finish they were only eight hours behind the plane that arrived in Melbourne first.

There were seven people on the plane, the pilot, co-pilot, wireless operator, engineer and three passengers. There was a galley, toilet and cargo storage area in the plane with seven windows down each side.

When I interviewed Olga Butt about the night of the landing she said it was the worst storm she had ever seen in Albury and unlike most stormy bursts it lasted for four hours. Two and a half to three inches of rain fell during the night. The Uiver was meant to leave Charleville, fly south to Cunnamulla, and go West of Bourke to Hillston, past Yarrawonga down to Seymour then to Melbourne. It was blown a hundred miles to the East. When the plane landed at Albury Racecourse the first person to go over to it was Jean Thompson. Thea Rasche opened the door of the Uiver and said 'Is this Melbourne?' Jean said 'No, this is Albury.' Clearly the four flight personnel, during the very nervous time of trying to find somewhere to land before running out of fuel weren't communicating their position with the passengers. They were well aware of the danger.

Duncan McPherson, a photographer, drove his car out to the Racecourse at first light after the landing and took the first photo that day of the Uiver in the infield. The internal area of the course is 80 acres. The plane had approached from the south after dropping two magnesium flares. It took approximately eighty metres to pull up after landing on the soggy ground, stopping about forty metres south-east of the winning post near the end of the straight where it stayed overnight. The first light photo shows the plane facing north. On the right is a policeman, Constable Heaney's job was to guard the plane overnight. A 1937 photo of the racecourse shows Alf Waugh indicating where the plane came in through a gap in the trees. When the cars shone their lights in, they were on the other side of the fence. There were only about 80 cars there on the night.

On the morning of the extraction some reports say there were about 300 cars and 800 people, of which 300 people were involved in lifting, pushing and pulling the Uiver out of the mud as it was too boggy to involve large machinery or horses. The starboard side was bogged more heavily than the port side.

Arthur Newnham is pictured near the plane, he risked his job at 2CO by cutting into the radio broadcast and calling on cars to go to the racecourse. He was well recognised by the Dutch people being presented with a silver handled walking stick and a silver cigarette case.

By 6.30 am, more people had started to gather. A photograph shows the house belonging to Mr Peacock, whose wife had manned their telephone all night speaking to the authorities and the media. The crew decided to unload the plane, truck the cargo and passengers to Wangaratta, fly to Wangaratta, reload them and fly to Melbourne, so as to not break the handicap conditions of the Race.

Around 7 am, we can see the Ledger Stand in the background, large ropes have arrived from Logans and have been attached to the axles of the plane. Mr Stuart Logan was a Councillor who had a building supply shop in Swift St. In the 1930s and 40s tug of wars were a popular sport held at all the Shows. Tubby Macklan was a well-known anchor man. Mr Bill Colley, the Deputy Mayor can be seen wearing his butcher's apron as two hundred or so of Albury's finest pull on the ropes and lift the fuselage, aiming to get the plane out of the water logged ground and pointing east. Just at that time a plane arrives overhead which has been sent by the Shell Oil Company from Melbourne. There is a photographer in the plane who takes some blurry snaps. They have landed at Wangaratta on the way and found the aerodrome too wet for a large 10 ton plane. The photo taken by the Shell plane shows about 250 people on the infield and the Uiver in a position where it can taxi to the south.

The Uiver manages to taxi to the south-west corner of the infield and prepares to unload all moveable objects from within the plane. This includes the seats, luggage, galley items and mail bags.

The crowd is intrigued watching the drama unfold, especially an old bearded gentleman wearing a bowler hat. He is James Hodge (Mavis Stokes' grandfather) who at 80 years of age has walked to the racecourse from his home in central Albury. An ex-mayor of Albury and a retired tinsmith and plumber, he has never held a driver's licence. What thoughts are running through his mind? At this stage it has been decided that they cannot land at Wangaratta, some mail bags are transported to the Albury Post Office, other mail bags are loaded into a large sedan to go to Melbourne with Van Brugge, preceded in another large sedan by Prins and the three passengers. The Uiver's motors are started up and it travels 10 metres at full revs where it again becomes bogged. All hands are called back on deck to the ropes and the plane is pulled backwards and forwards in a zig zag fashion, about 40 metres closer to the hare pen away from the swampy ground. At this time the interior field of the racecourse is used by the Albury &

District Coursing Club. Live coursing was banned in NSW in 1953 as it had come to be seen as a blood sport. The fence had 12 small holes for the hares to get into their safe paddock, they would always run back to where their sit was. One handler would release the hares and another person would slip or release the greyhounds. My grandfather Jim Royal was a greyhound slipper at Albury. The dogs had leather collars with tags of different colours so the judge could identify them and give them points for the chase. When both dogs had spotted the hare and were pulling equally, the slipper released the handle which was attached to a leather lead and cable which pulled a pin in the dogs' collars thus starting the pursuit. John Craig can remember being told that some of the older hares would keep an eye on the pursuing dogs and do a little side step to lose them. The greyhounds were running so quickly it took them a long time to turn and pull up. According to John Craig very few of the hares were ever caught, although newspaper reports suggest otherwise. The hare fence is most likely the one that was partially dismantled because it was in the way of the Uiver's projected take off strip. In a photo of the hare pen fence we see that the posts have been painted white for greater visibility, so if a race horse escaped the track it wouldn't run into them.

The next aerial photograph we have is taken half an hour later. Does this mean the Shell Oil plane is still circling or was there a second plane? There are some reports of the Shell plane landing on the infield tipping over, but there are no photographs of that.

Jan Moll, the co-pilot, appears stressed and concerned, but a very brave man never the less. They have already had one attempt at taking off by this stage and also the Boeing 247D is closing in on them from Charleville and Bourke. They don't want to be held up for any longer than is necessary or they will lose their second place and may fail to win the handicap section of the race.

Just before 10am after the engines are warmed up for at least 10 minutes, the aircraft mechanic, Mr Prins was directed to stand at the 200 metre mark of the proposed take off strip. If the plane had been unable to take off at this point, the take off would have to be abandoned. Prins disobeyed instructions and actually stood 250 metres along the strip. After a tremendous build up and roar of motors the plane attempts to take off at full revs. It hits a depression in the ground just as it reaches Prins, which bounces it into the air. Luckily this allows the plane to quickly gather speed and even though it bunny hops several times the ascent is successful. The cheering crowd is jubilant! There are no more clear photos after the final taxiing shot possibly due to the slow speed of the camera shutters and film of the day. Doug believes that the photographers were also waiting to get a shot of the plane crashing if that occurred. The Uiver just cleared the fence at the north end of the racecourse, flew over Lavington then the Monument and picked up the railway line at Barnawartha using it as their navigation line to Melbourne and the rest is history.

Footnotes: The Albury Coursing Club minutes reported that the Dutch aircraft had done considerable damage to the Plumpton (coursing area) when landing and taking off. The Secretary was instructed to write to the pilot claiming compensation for the damage done to the value of 25 pounds. However the Coursing Club's lease had expired at the end of October 1934 and the Race Club stepped in and stated that as the legal entity involved it would not be claiming damages. Good relationships with the Dutch remained untarnished.

The magnesium flares that were dropped were extremely bright and would have lit up the whole town. They floated down carried by silk parachutes, one of which is in the Albury LibraryMuseum the other apparently cut into pieces and souvenired. Two fragments have been located.