







Hansen, another 2Lt. named George Gee, and four Sgts—nine men in all—took off in 30739 and headed south for Sydney, about an hour's flight away.

The only first hand account of what happened next was later provided by the Native Magistrate of Sydney Island:

The plane was crashed on land. Flew around the island more than four times. At last during the time flying it slide wheel down and flew off at a distance of not more than a mile and then return perhaps ten or twenty feet above sea level. When reached above there be fit [sic] flew up of all a sudden it bumped the palm with right wing. During that time the plane get in fire and at the last the body fell down beyond the Maneaba [meeting house]. All the crew found dead except one of the lot get breath not fifteen minutes later, then died again.

From this it would seem that the plane may have been attempting to land, but the accident report by Major W. C. Cotner, Commanding Officer of the Air Transport Command unit at Canton, paints a more complex picture. Cotner inspected the site the next day and wrote:

It was found that the right wing had clipped a tree, outside of the motor, at the beach while coming in low from the water. ... The right wing struck a tree breaking the tree off about thirty feet from the ground. The ship must have been in a right bank or there would have been other trees damaged in this vicinity as there was not enough room for a ship to come in between the trees. A portion of the right wing was found approximately 86 feet inland. The plane went up over the trees for a distance of about 150 yards and started coming down through the trees again, shearing off the trees until it came to rest approximately 376 yards from the first tree which was struck. The motors continued on after the plane came to rest, one for

46 yards and the other 63 yards from the plane. The airplane burned completely with the exception of the tail section and the left wing from the motor out, and the right wing which had been lost. The right elevator showed evidence of the plane having been scraped along the ground on the right side. The wheels were retracted and that the throttles and controls were in full flight or cruising position. All evidence indicates that the pilot came in in a right bank, struck the tree, careened on over the village and other trees and finally hit ground with all power on. Both propellers were badly bent and broken off. One occupant was said to have been thrown clear of the plane but died a few minutes later. The remaining eight were said to have been found in the plane after the fire. The natives stated that the plane made several circles over the island and kept coming lower and lower and finally came in over the water quite low just before the crash occurred.

The Gilbertese wrapped the bodies in white sheets and covered them with woven mats in graves six feet deep. The next day an Army Air Force investigation team exhumed and recovered the bodies. Maj. Cotner put the cause of the accident to "low flying." A review board later found that "it appears that the pilot may have been attempting a forced landing." Whether Bill Prater simply smacked a tree while pulling a buzz job or had an inflight emergency and failed in a desperate attempt to land his airplane will never be known for sure. What is certain is that ten tons of Douglas workmanship and the lives of nine young men came to a fiery end on an otherwise tranquil Pacific island on an afternoon 55 years ago. It seems likely that relics of that tragedy eventually made their way to Nikumaroro and are among the artifacts collected by TIGHAR. It is also the case that knowing what airplane crashed on Sydney Island may allow us to eliminate yet another alternative explanation for recovered objects which we suspect are from a much more famous, but no less tragic, loss.

