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Military tribute returns to site of Canberra air disaster, 80 years on

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Andrew Brown

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The first time Rosalind Wright visited the site of her grandfather's death for a memorial service, a Prime Minister was next to her in mourning.

"I was only 12, but it was so cold it snowed and the service was hurried along - but Robert Menzies was there and walked along and met with all of the surviving relatives," Mrs Wright said.

That service was in 1960, marking 20 years since her grandfather, External Affairs Minister Sir Henry Gullett, died along with nine others in the 1940 Canberra air disaster. The service also saw a memorial unveiled at the site.

The 1940 flight from Melbourne to Canberra killed three senior federal ministers and members of Robert Menzies' War Cabinet as well as the chief of general staff.

Since that service, a catafalque party and military servicemen and women had not taken part in any memorial for the fatal crash.

That was until this Thursday, when the sounds of a snare drum and army boots on gravel returned to the memorial site, as part of commemorations for the 80th anniversary of the disaster. Mrs Wright was among the crowd attending the service, along with her brother Peter Gullett. They both laid a wreath in memory of their grandfather.

"There's a very small percentage of people who know about the disaster. At the time of the incident, Canberra was a tiny community," Mr Gullett said.

"Events like the memorial have been enormously helpful, and it helps to shed light on it and that's what keeps the memory of it."

The memorial was livestreamed due to social distancing restrictions.

The ceremony began with the arrival of the catafalque party, which then stood watch over the memorial plaque during the service.

The Last Post and a minute's silence was then held. The pine forest was punctuated only by the sounds of nearby birds.

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Former NSW attorney-general Andrew Tink, who wrote a book about the disaster, was among those who attended the ceremony.

He said the crash had an enormous impact on Australian politics at the time.

"Most of the War Cabinet were wiped out in the plane crash and it left Menzies bereft and distraught," Mr Tink said. "He then went to a general election rather than have three byelections, and his government only just got back in a hung parliament."

That election left the first Menzies government severely weakened, which led to him losing power.

While the crash happened 80 years ago, intrigue continues to surround the incident. In recent years, new information has emerged suggesting RAAF pilot Flight Lieutenant Bob Hitchcock was not behind the wheel of the plane as first believed.

In his book, Mr Tink said it was most likely Minister for Air James Fairbairn, who had been a World War I pilot, flying the plane.

"Fairbairn took over the controls of the plane and pulled rank," Mr Tink said.

Fairbairn had previously stated plans to practise landings whenever possible.

A 15-minute delay to the plane taking off from Melbourne could possibly be attributed to Fairbairn getting behind the wheel of the aircraft, Mr Tink said.

Mrs Wright said that eight decades on, it was important to keep the memory of the victims in the crash alive.