

Bakers Creek Tragedy
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“This catastrophe was the worst ever suffered in the SWPA [Southwest Pacific Area].”

That is how the 317th Troop Carrier Group History (January 1943-January 1944, Volume I) described this deadly and, for many years, secret aviation disaster. The United States Army Air Force (USAAF) suffered an unprecedented and shocking loss during a classified World War II passenger flight in Australia. A B-17 aircraft crashed on 14 June 1943 in the area of Bakers Creek, adjacent to MacKay Queensland, and killed 40 of the 41 passengers.

The B-17 belonged to the 46th Troop Carrier Squadron of the 317th Troop Carrier Group according to the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA) in Alabama.



B-17 Flying Fortress
Photo from Boeing

The 317th was a Fifth Air Force (5 AF) unit from December 1942 through September 1948. AFRA explained that the Air Force inactivated this unit on 14 September 1949 after moving the 317th to Germany. The unit even participated in the Berlin Airlift before inactivating.

The 46th squadron deployed 19 crewmembers and three aircraft which included a B-17C, a B-17E, and an LB-30 to MacKay. They carried out the mission of flying daily personnel furlough flights between New Guinea and Mackay. “It appears that this aircraft crashed while making a routine passenger flight between Mackay and New Guinea. The reason why the flight was classified secret was that all flights in a combat zone were classified during World War II,”

advised Mr. Barry Spink. He is an archivist at AFHRA which is located at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

Lieutenant General Bruce Wright is the 5 AF and United States Forces Japan (USFJ) Commander located at Yokota Air Base, Japan. He spoke at the Bakers Creek Memorial Association ceremony the first weekend of June 2007 in Australia. The general told organizers, “...all of you should be very proud of what you have done to honor the young Airmen who gave their lives defending our two Nations.”



Left to right) Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England; Harry McAlpine, president of the Returned and Services League's Washington, D.C., sub-branch; Robert S. Cutler, executive director of the Bakers Creek Memorial Association; and Australian Ambassador to the United States Dennis Richardson pose for a photograph next to the Bakers Creek air crash memorial on the Australian Embassy's grounds Nov. 8 2006 in Washington, D.C. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore