

OIA-2017-2641

21 February 2017

Mr Bruce Hardwick

fyi-request-5331-beb3231b@requests.fyi.org.nz

Dear Mr Hardwick

I refer to your email of 5 February 2017 requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA), information pertaining to the disappearance on 18 August 1942 of NZ964, flying from Woodbourne, including the weather conditions for flying on that day and the flight evolutions in which the pilot, John Orbell, may have been engaged.

Leading Aircraftman John Ronald Scott Orbell, Royal New Zealand Air Force, 2 Service Flying Training School, is recorded as having died accidentally on 18 August 1942, while engaged in solo aerobatic training. He was 24.

The Evening Post, Volume CXXXIV, Issue 43, 19 August 1942, reported that:

An aircraft of the Royal New Zealand Air Force in which Leading Aircraftman John Ronald Scott Orbell was undergoing sole acrobatic [sic] training is missing from a South Island flying training school. An intensive search is being maintained. Leading Aircraftman Orbell's next-of-kin is his father, Major R. G... S. Orbell, of Oamaru, at present in Dunedin.

The website findlostaircraft.co.nz states that Harvard NZ964:

... departed Woodbourne at 7.55 am on an Airforce [sic] training exercise to practice aerobatic maneuvers [sic] – for a one hour period. The outer boundaries these exercises were meant to be carried out in was at approximately a 12 mile radius from Woodbourne.

According to the available records, the weather on the morning of 18 August was characterised as good / a cloudless day with the Wairau Valley clear of cloud, low cloud over Havelock / fog in valleys and the Sounds, and small clumps of cloud in the Sounds area. Winds were reported as being about 3 mph (probably a surface wind speed at Woodbourne), with light variable winds over the region. Upper winds were forecast to not exceed 5 mph up to 5,000 feet, with winds at 220 degrees and 15 mph at 10,000 feet. Visibility was reported as excellent in most areas in the region; only in some cases was visibility less than 30 miles. Smooth flying conditions were expected at all levels.

In terms of the aerobatic manoeuvres that his flying instructor asked Leading Aircraftman Orbell to rehearse, he was supposed to concentrate on rolls to the left and “rolls-off-the top”.

I trust the information provided will help with your attempts to locate the aircraft, although if you do find LA Orbell's remains, I would ask that you notify the Air Force as quickly as possible and that the cockpit area of the aircraft not be disturbed.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'G.R. Smith', with a stylized flourish at the end.

G.R. SMITH

Commodore, RNZN

Chief of Staff HQNZDF