

529. Kofca Sydney "SUN" NOV 7, 78

'UFO' PILOT: DID HE FLY INTO THE SEA?

ONE minute our plane was flying horizontally, the single-engine running smoothly.

The next, it was in a steep bank, heading for the water. And we didn't know.

The frightening realisation that we could disappear in the dark water of Bass Strait arrived too late.

And it would have been too late — except for our class 1 instrument-rated pilot at the controls.

My pilot, Keith Powles, a photographer and I were trying to "relive" the last minutes of missing pilot Frederick Valentich's flight . . . and possibly his life.

Our flight from Moorabbin had started out in



Frederick Valentich

fine, almost perfect weather conditions . . . similar to the evening Valentich disappeared.

We had deliberately set out an hour after Valentich's take-off time of just after 6 pm to cancel out daylight saving.

But the further west we travelled, the more cloud we seemed to encounter.

Had Valentich, too encountered these darkening skies after fairly bright sunshine? NO.

Valentich's sunset was at 6.43 on the night he disappeared. Ours was



Brad Forrest

At 7.12 pm on Saturday, October 21, Melbourne Flight Service lost contact with pilot Frederick Valentich in Bass Strait between Cape Otway and King Island. Before disappearing Valentich reported a "strange aircraft" hovering over his Cessna. No trace has been found of his single-engined plane and it has become one of the greatest mysteries in Australian and world aviation history.

The Sun's man in Melbourne, BRAD FORREST, retraced the flight in a similar Cessna 182, taking the same route and flying at about the same time as Valentich. This is his report.

SUN MAN TRACES MYSTERY FLIGHT

not until 40 minutes later.

We knew Valentich had probably turned away from the coast and short of the Cape Otway lighthouse about this time to head for King Island.

But did this pilot, without an instrument rating, realise he had no more than 10 minutes of light?

We certainly found this out.

While our plane was pointed towards the west, we could make out a horizon.

But shortly after heading south and in the direction of King Island, water and sky merged into one.

"This is the difficult part," said Keith.

"Even experienced pilots can get scrambled if they don't concentrate . . . it's called disorientation."

His lesson took only a few minutes.

A colleague and I covered our eyes for the exercise so we couldn't see the "horizon control" on the instruments.

Keith said he would

move the plane in a few directions, ask us to guess which way we were flying, then look.

We both guessed marginally to the left.

To our horror, we were wrong . . . terribly wrong.

The plane was banking at about 60 degrees to the right. It was, we found, arcing towards the sea.

An inexperienced pilot could easily misjudge the bank one way or the other.

Keith showed how by pulling back on the controls what could have been the result.

The plane tightened its turn instead of straightening up because of the G-forces already present.

It then started to spiral downwards, before our pilot corrected with instruments.

Valentich, distracted by the UFO, said later in his conversation he was "orbiting" with the UFO over him.

Was Valentich, in fact in a very steep bank with a wing pointed towards the water?



● Above: A map of the area where Valentich's plane is believed to have come down.

Were in fact the lights he saw actually his own lights reflected in the water in the darkness as he flew lower than he thought?

He would not have had to turn the plane completely upside down, as we found out.

And if he realised the banking, and then miscalculated he might have run out of time.

Night flying without instruments experience is, indeed, a hazardous task.