

## Does Australia have its own Bermuda Triangle?

Reg Watson looks at one of the many unusual disappearances that have occurred in Bass Strait.

**A**T 6.19pm on Saturday, October 21, 1978, a Cessna 182L light aircraft took off from Moorabbin airport, Victoria. The lone occupant was 20-year-old flying instructor Frederick Valentich whose destination was King Island, Bass Strait.

Valentich and his plane would never make the island and would never be seen again; no wreckage, no oil spill, no body — nothing.

Fourteen years later, the mystery remains and the question is still asked, "What happened to Frederick Valentich?"

Did he have a close encounter, as has been claimed, with a UFO? Or was his disappearance a hoax, as has been asserted, or did he have an unfortunate accident? We will explore these questions.

First we must establish that mystery disappearances over and on Bass Strait by aeroplanes and ships of various sizes and types are not uncommon. Indeed, we could say they occur quite frequently.

One such amazing event was the disappearance in 1920 of two vessels, the barquentine Southern Cross and the 12-man vessel Amelia I. What is more remarkable is

quoting the Southern Cross and the 12-man vessel Amelia J. What is more remarkable is the disappearance of the plane, a De Havilland DH9A, piloted by seasoned veteran, Captain W. J. Stutt, who was ordered to search for the two vessels.

His plane was last seen over Cape Barron Island by his colleague, Major Anderson, who was also searching in a sister aeroplane. Stutt's plane was seen to go behind a cloud, never to return. The intriguing aspect was that "rockets" or "flares" visible up to eight minutes at a time were witnessed by locals along the east coast of Tasmania before and after the event. Even though Major Ander-

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son said it was way off course and Stutt would "never land there" he helped search the area to no effect. No source of those lights in the sky have ever been satisfactorily answered.

On May 6, 1908, the 114-ton vessel Orion owned by William Holyman and Son Ltd, Launceston, went down off the coast of Flinders Island. The vessel Wybia was sent to search for the Orion. Meanwhile a resident reported at the time that she had seen "rockets" in the sky. Wreckage was later found on Long Island off Flinders. Twenty-seven people went down and were never found.

On Friday, October 19, 1934 (note: October again) the airliner Miss Hobart, a 12-passenger De Havilland owned by William Holyman and Son, left northern Tasmania at 9am for Victoria. It too was never seen again. Fifty-seven years later the circumstances of its disappearance remain a mystery.

The following year, again in October (the second), another De Havilland craft, again owned by William Holyman and Son, crashed off Flinders Island, killing all five occupants. And while there was a witness to

occupants. And while there was a witness to the crash, there is mystery as to why it crashed.

Radioing in just minutes before intending to land at Whitemaker, Flinders Island, pilot Norman Evans said that the craft was on course and Mr Eichstadt, the operator at

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Flinders, said that it was not in distress. Then, as a witness stated, the craft behaved in an erratic manner, turned on its side and disappeared behind a hill.

Projecting ourselves to mid-1978, letters began appearing in the small local weekly newspaper published on King Island called *King Island News*. Reports of lights in the sky over the island began in July of that year, a full three months before Valentich's possible encounter. One letter, dated September 20, 1978, reported "beautiful strange lights". One light, reported the *King Island News*, followed a vehicle down the north road into Currie (the main town) and "then disappeared towards the lighthouse".

Another strange light appeared over Camp Creek. "The strange vehicle was reported oval in shape". This "strange vehicle" was the same shape as reported by island fisherman George Newman and sons Peter and Neil who, while on a hunting trip, followed it in a vehicle before it disappeared towards the ocean.

On October 21, 1978, Frederick Valentich left Moorabbin Airport, Victoria, for a private flight to King Island. His intention was to log up more night flying experience and in the meantime pick up some crayfish in Tasmania for the officers of the Air Training Corps of which he was an instructor. It was to be a quick trip and he planned to be back in Melbourne by 10pm for a family reunion.

For some reason, testified his father, Guido Valentich, his son was 40 minutes late leaving the club at Moorabbin Airport.

Guido Valentich, his son was 70 minutes late leaving the club at Moorabbin Airport. It was revealed later that he did not inform the King Island Service of his flight plan. King Island authorities had no knowledge of his flight intention nor, naturally, the need for landing lights as this is the flyer's responsibility.

This fact has raised the question whether

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he had any intention of ever reaching Currie Airport or whether he had in fact intended to land more inconspicuously at an alternative airport. This had led to the charge of "hoax", even though it would have to be an elaborate one, a charge Guido Valentich rebuffs strongly.

Frederick was a keen student of the UFO mystery but, asserts his father, was not a "fanatic" on the subject, though convinced of their existence.

Forty-seven minutes after taking off, with his aircraft over Bass Strait, he radioed the Melbourne Flight Service and what followed is the remarkable conversation.

Frederick asked traffic control whether there was any other craft in the area below 5000ft. They replied, "No known traffic".

Frederick reported a large aircraft below him, only to have it pass over him "at least a thousand feet above". Because of the speed it was travelling he requested to know whether any airforce craft were in the area. Again, Melbourne stated, "No known aircraft in the vicinity".

The mysterious craft then approached Frederick from his east side. Frederick stated, "It seems to me that he's playing some sort of game. He's flying over me two or three times at a time at speeds I could not identify." He was not able to identify the craft. Then at 7.09pm he said, "It's not an aircraft". Melbourne asked: "Can you describe the . . . er . . . aircraft?"

"As it's flying past it's a long shape . . . [I

"As it's flying past it's a long shape . . . [I cannot] identify more than that. It has such speed . . . before me right now, Melbourne."

Asked how large the object was, Frederick replied that it seemed stationary and "what I'm doing right now is orbiting and the thing is just orbiting on top of me also and it's got a green light and sort of metallic. It's all shiny [on] the outside."

Later he stated, ". . . the strange aircraft



Frederick Valentich: disappeared in Bass Strait in 1978.

is hovering on top of me again . . . it's

is hovering on top of me again ... it's hovering and it is not an aircraft."

There was no further transmission.

The Aircraft Accident Investigation Summary Report states that at the time the weather was clear with a trace of stratocumulus cloud at 5000 to 7000ft, scattered cirrus cloud at 3000ft, excellent visibility and light winds.

An intensive air, sea and land search was continued until October 25, 1978, but no

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trace of the aircraft was ever found.

So what happened? A number of explanations were expressed; one that Valentich was flying his plane upside down during the conversation and that it was possible he saw the lights of Cape Otway lighthouse and that of King Island. The Department of Transport said that there had been no other report of anything unusual in the area on that Saturday night; but this was wrong.

The *King Island News* in its leading article after Frederick's reported disappearance states, "Enquiries at the *News* office make it clear that the public is not prepared to be fobbed off with the jargon of officialdom." It went on to say on the very same night other sightings had been made in Currie and further north.

At 2pm on the same day, October 21, a woman at King Island was sunbathing in her backyard. The sky was clear except for one cloud and from that cloud came an object "similar to a large ball about quarter the size of the moon". The object, she said, was white or silver in colour and moved slowly to the west toward the sea.

From the coast of Victoria and from Melbourne on the same day came reports of an unknown object.

A photo taken of the sunset over Bass Strait, 20 minutes before the disappearance

Strait, 20 minutes before the disappearance of Frederick, by Roy Manifold, was analysed by computer and was found to contain a solid, probably metallic object.

Six colour negatives were inspected for evaluation and in frame six a large cloud-like image with a disc structure is visible above the tenuous shape.

Nearly twelve years later, Guido Valentich was approached by a witness who had never before come forward.

Not wanting even now to publicise himself and the responsible position he holds in employment, he told Guido he had seen the

craft (the UFO) which encountered his son from the ground.

The hoax claim, however, persists. Some believe Frederick planned it all, including the part where he will turn up later with a fabulous story only to earn masses of money for revealing all.

Quentin Fogarty, the New Zealand television journalist, when aboard a flight off the New Zealand coast travelling with a film crew just two months later in 1978, described on tape and filmed bright lights that were tracked on radar.

The Valentich story naturally interested him and he eventually met a well-known psychic from the United States, Pat Gagliardo. Mrs Gagliardo sketched a route possibly taken by Frederick and it appeared to suggest that Frederick actually reached the extreme north-west coast of Tasmania.

Impressed sufficiently enough to organise a search, Mr Fogarty and a friend were unable to find anything.

Guido believes that his son may well be alive, but it is his belief that he was abducted by a UFO.

"The fact that absolutely no trace was found and during the search for him the water was quite calm. Something would

water was quite calm. Something would have been found.

"Secondly, my son would not go on the radio to say such things. It would jeopardise his career," he said.

A hoax? An accident? The evidence for either is not convincing, but there is much stronger evidence that prior to and on the day something strange was occurring in the sky over Bass Strait right through to the coast of New Zealand.

Can we conclude anything but that Frederick Valentich on October 21, 1978, off the coast of King Island encountered a UFO? The answer must be that we cannot.