

Australian Tragedy

Waikerie Gliding Club

Letter dated 6/11/44 from Hon. Secretary, Jack Moody and copies of reports on accident in which Ken Riebe was killed when "*Kite.I*" Sailplane broke up in the air on 28th October 1944. He states:—"Thanks a lot for your telegrams re Ken. As you can imagine it was a pretty big knock to our Club. Ken was one of our mainstays both as a pilot and a worker apart from being such a decent chap and of course the loss of "*Kite.I*" will curtail our activities very considerably, however, we have the young chaps coming on and we will do the best we can with the machines we now have and hope that at some future date we will be able to either buy or build another high performance job. In regard to the accident, there was no doubt in our minds that Ken had the altitude record in the bag at the time of the crash. The two attached reports are those which we prepared for the Civil Aviation Board and we consider that they give the only reasonable explanation of the accident."

Extract From Report by Secretary of Waikerie Gliding Club

Report of fatal accident at Waikerie on Saturday 28th October 1944, when Kenneth Herman Riebe, 35 years, Orchardist, single, of Waikerie, was killed during a soaring thermal flight in the sailplane "*Kite.I*".

In a gentle S.S.W. breeze K. Riebe left the Waikerie drome at 3:20 P.M. from a 1,000 ft. launch, immediately connected with good thermals and circled steadily to an estimated altitude of 7000 ft. and while doing so drifted almost due north over very hostile tall mallee country. When last observed he was approximately 10 to 12 miles north of launching site still circling. At 4:30 it was plainly seen that he had struck very bumpy air conditions. It must have been exceedingly rough for members to have noticed the unevenness of the flight at that distance, so much so that the Instructor Mr. E. R. Barratt, remarked to the launching crew words to the effect that—"He's struck something there." The machine was not observed after this and the Club members on the drome made preparation to set out with the trailer, to retrieve the machine. As it is an unwritten law among flying members that on all cross country flights pilots are to follow only well defined roads and if possible to land near farm homesteads, it was thought that the pilot had turned east to come on to the Morgan-Renmark Road, and at the time last seen he had sufficient altitude to do this, the retrieving crew therefore traveled east along this road. Being unable to contact the machine on this road and there being no communication from the

pilot up to 10 A.M. on the following morning the R.A.A.F. at Mallala were communicated with and they sent two machines up to make an aerial search of the route of the most likely direction of the flight.

These planes covered an area 20 miles wide from Cadell to Renmark without being able to locate the sailplane. No further aerial search was possible that day so the Secretary of the Club (J. E. Moody) got in touch with practically all the settlers on the northern side of the river but was unable to contact anyone who had seen the sailplane. Parties of horsemen and several cars with people who knew the country were then organized for day break next morning with instructions to make a smoke signal if anything was found of the machine. All wireless stations were requested to broadcast for information and the R.A.A.F. at Mallala, Parafield and Mildura were again requested to make a further and more intensive aerial search. Two machines from Mallala arrived at the Waikerie drome at 8 A.M. and set off on the search at 8:30 A.M. In the meantime Mr. J. W. S. Taylor of Taylorville who had set out at a very early hour on horseback and by pure chance had arrived near the scene of the accident 7 miles from his home at 8 A.M. Mr. H. J. Mortimer of Waikerie coming from another direction arrived at the same spot about 15 minutes after Mr. Taylor. When Mr. Taylor found the wrecked machine he immediately sent up the pre-arranged smoke signal which was picked up by the two planes which had left Waikerie drome at about the same time that the signal fire had been lighted. On reaching the signal fire the planes made low circles and dropped a code of signals to Mr. Taylor, who was then able to indicate that the pilot had been killed. After the return of the planes to the drome a ground party set out with Dr. Nicol, Constable Schmerl and the Coroner and brought back the remains for burial on Tuesday morning.

Extract From Report by Club Officials

A. E. Seary (President), J. Moody (Secretary), E. R. Barratt, (Instructor) and R. G. Coats (Assistant Instructor).

Machine, known as "*Kite.I*" built and designed by M. Warner of Sydney, purchased by this Club from Dr. J. B. Thiersch of Adelaide in May 1940 and we understand that the machine was built about 4 years prior to that date. Wing span 42 feet made in three sections, the two outboard sections being tapered. Wing fully cantilever. Pod and boom type fuselage with normal tail assembly. Boom triangular in shape. Controls, Normal stick and rudder pedals incorporating push rods and 13 gauge piano wire where straight and steel cable over pulleys. Differential

ailerons actuated by push rods. Instruments, Air speed indicator. Altimeter. Bubble level turn indicator. Slator Cobb Variometer. Operational Speed. At best gliding angle, 42 miles per hour. At best sinking speed 38 miles per hour, 2½ feet per second. Stalling speed below 25 miles per hour. Terminal velocity speed not known but has often been pulled out sharply at 80 miles per hour. Flying characteristics of machine. Sweet on all controls, sensitive but not vicious. Very stable. When correctly trimmed would not spin when stalled but would go into a gentle dive coming back to normal at flying speed. Since becoming the property of this Club it has done 330 launches for approximately 54 hours' flying time.

Weather Conditions on Day of Accident

At time of launching a gentle wind from the S.S.W. which later freshened to approximately 15 M.P.H. and shifted to nearly due South. Cloud base estimated at 12,000 to 15,000 feet. Temperature moderately warm dropping towards evening to an almost frosty night. Leaving the winch wire at 3:20 P.M. at approximately 1,000 feet pilot was observed to turn west under fairly large but flat cloud, where he immediately picked up lift in the region of 3 feet per second and began climbing. He continued circling under this cloud gently drifting North for about an hour when he was seen to straighten out and fly S.S.W. along a broken cloud street. A few minutes later he was observed to fly into a much stronger thermal in which he tight circled gaining height rapidly. At this point of the flight it appeared that he was making erratic circles, which could have been caused by exceedingly rough air conditions or by the pilot becoming air sick or suffering from other disabilities. From this point at 4:35 P.M. the machine was not seen again. As the machine was approximately 11 to 12 miles away it was only seen while circling in front of a cloud background.

Nature of Country Where Accident Happened

Situation approximately 11 miles due north of Waikerie drome in sandy country densely timbered with tall mallee and sandy porcupine ridges.

Comments and Conclusions

On arriving at the wreckage the first thing noted was the position of the pilot. He was lying on his left side with his left foot in the rudder pedal and right hand grasping the bottom of the rubber grip (an ordinary bicycle handle grip about 5" long) which covered the top of the control column, he was strapped almost in flying position, except that the back rest and seat had gone. It appeared that the main