

The search for the crash sites of the Hunter and Canberra lost during Op Miracle, Oct 1979.
By Bob Manser

As I now live in Chimoio, Manica Province, Mozambique, I have been keen for some time to locate the exact crash sites of the Hunter of Brian Gordon and the Canberra of Kev Pienke and JJ Strydom (killed in action on 3 October 1979).

I was not sure where to start but having had chats with various ex-Scouts friends plus many chats with Prop and also help from PB and other ORAFs members I had a fair idea where to look, give or take a few hundred square kilometres! Feedback from local farmers and other folks resident in Manica helped, plus also intrigued by vague stories that local tribesmen knew of the incidents that occurred nearly thirty years ago and had varied ideas as to where the remains of the aircraft were.

Luckily a few weeks back my two friends – Pedro Swanepoel and Richard Quinell - who work for a SA based forestry company offered to take myself and co-searcher, Barry Meikle on a tour around Monte Casino as it was all part of their forestry area. We started off from near Manica town and headed up the old Tete, Mavonde road looking for the elusive crossroads and the village called "Cruzamento" which translated means crossroads, all a bit confusing. After some hours of working our way up to the Pungue and back down the power line tracks on the east side of Monte Casino we drew blanks. Every indigenous we spoke to had not heard of any crashed planes: especially all those years ago.

We backtracked to the old Tete road again and stopped at various crossroads and hailed any bystander we could find seeking information. Mick Hamence will chuckle at this as I always carried the book on Canberra's by him and Winston Brent and showed the cover to any local we chatted to, hoping we may find one who may have had seen something similar in years gone by.

Anyhow eventually our luck was in, one chap knew of a site and pointed us in the right direction. It was to a small village cum growth point about 3kms past a crossroads. There we spoke to two officious looking gents who immediately knew what we were after. When asked as to the name of the small village, they replied "Cruzamento"

About 50 metres east of the road virtually in the centre of the village we came across a smallish depression in the ground and the remains of a turbine. The crash site was very close to the road, maybe 40 or 50 metres in, just behind some small shops, (they spell them kiosks or banca fixas here).



Barry Meikle and Bob Manser with a 30mm case and Hunter turbine

We scabbled around under the turbine and discovered about ten 30mm Aden gun "doppies" and a few rusty 30mm H/E heads. Many of the doppies still had un-burnt black cordite like granules in them. I reckon the 30mm shells certified the crash site as the one of the Hunter.

We were disappointed in the lack of wreckage but it must be remembered that most of it was taken away by Frelimo and put on display in Maputo.

The GPS co-ordinates are South 18degrees 34' and East 33 degrees 01'.



**The Gordon Hunter crash site
and remains of the turbine**



Another interesting fact is that the officious gents had heard of another crash site to the northwest, and said an aircraft was supposed to be in the foothills just on the border with Zimbabwe near a village called Ndanga; this must be the Canberra site.

We had run out of time that day but my forestry mates have promised us a jaunt in their sturdy Toyota Land cruiser next month when they visit that area to pay wages so hopefully we will eventually discover the Canberra wreckage.

It is a small world as a few weekends ago I trekked up to the Zambezi to see Mary Moffat's grave, wife of David Livingstone and on the way back popped into the bush camp and sawmill of Ant Whites and chatted to him about our planned search. He could not help though, as he was not involved in op miracle. However a day later into my office comes my mate of old, John Barnes who was returning from a brief holiday to the coast. He was actively involved in Miracle and was busy extracting his team from Cruzamento when the aircraft incidents occurred, so I got some first hand info from him.

All in all it was a great team effort and many thanks go to my Chimoio mates Pedro, Barry, Richard

and all at ORAFs who helped in this search.

One request please from ORAFs members who may help with this info. Many years ago my wife taught at the Sir Roy Welensky Junior School in Dett and one of her young pupils was a Brian Gordon. Can anybody let us know if this young pupil could have been the same Brian Gordon killed in the Hunter?

B Manser

Chimoio 27/10/07

Remarks by Prop

“all credit goes to Bob for this terrific achievement, for the resolute tenacity and drive to persevere in order reach the objective. Well done Bob, I am sure we all salute you.

I also need to acknowledge all the fine photographs (that in themselves speak a thousand words) and many maps which helped one to appreciate the enormity of the task.

I believe some special words of thanks are in order. To Eddy Norris for putting many interested bodies in touch with one another. To Kevin Tidy (the engineer who constructed the Chimoio Memorial) who flew Bob around Maingue / Monte Casino in his Cessna 182 aircraft. Thanks to local historian James 'Tackie' Bannerman who supplied maps of the areas. To Barry Meikle for his enthusiastic support for Bob. Pedro Swanepoel, who speaks Portuguese fluently, an essential team-member together with fellow forester Richard Quinell. Peter Petter-Bowyer was particularly helpful for pointers to Cruzamento village in his e-mails and his descriptions in Winds of Destruction. Willie van der Riet's reminiscences was riveting – he was sitting on a gomo at the time! Tony Oakley gave first hand accounts of the appalling weather conditions prevailing – plus a good write-up in Pride of Eagles. Big Katanga Mac John McKenzie for edging everyone on, especially me! Thanks also to Bruce Harrison for his evaluations, and particularly his influence and involvement in the Rhodesian Forces Memorial Project.

Readers May well be interested in the comments received so far. Tony wrote: "What a marvellous achievement, thank you for your fortitude and perseverance. The loss of Brian, on what was a very troublesome target, was a sad loss indeed. I have written to Prop before on this incident; Beryl also has some material in her book, for up until this point, the Squadron had achieved remarkable successes against very hostile targets without loss of life. It was an accepted fact that the Hunter was invincible, how could this have happened? I am pleased there can now be some closure on this sad event and would also appreciate pictures or maps as they become available. Thank you all once again for your sterling efforts and I look forward to hearing that you have been as lucky with finding the Can".

Willie wrote: "Fantastic news, a moment in time brought back, well done Bob and team, please keep me in mind when you have the photos. Pamwe Chete".

Bill Sykes added: "have read all the letters of praise for your efforts, and cannot better those sentiments. Congratulations indeed ...Wouldn't it be great if you have as much success with the Canberra. And what a story for the next Bateleur."

PB wrote: "Amazing after 28 years to see Brian Gordon's unfortunate death site. Copied to Vic who was his OC. No doubt you will pass this to Eddy Norris when he returns to RSA. He will pass it on to many who will be very interested."

And thanks to ORAFs for distribution . . .