

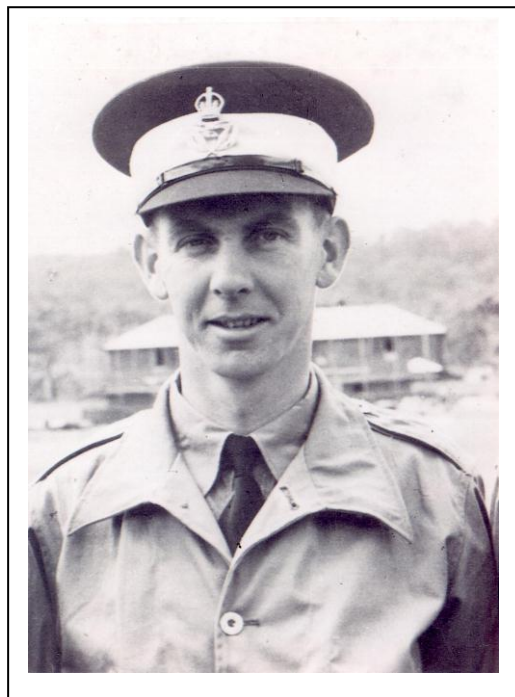


St George's College

PERTH · WESTERN AUSTRALIA

CHARLES VERNON ANDERSON

24 APRIL 1916 TO 19 FEBRUARY 1941



Charles was born in Perth, the elder son of Nicholas and Agnes Anderson, who had been newsagents in Narrogin since 1909. The family had an early association with aviation, when in December 1919 his parents were among the first Narrogin residents to fly with Major Brearley. He won a scholarship to attend Perth Modern School (1929 to 1933), where he was a School Prefect and an editor of *The Sphinx* magazine. The Principal noted in his school record: *One of the better lads admitted. Promising in all ways. A nice personality.*

He enrolled in the Faculty of Engineering at The University of Western Australia in 1934, but did not come to St George's until 1936. He played a very active role in College life, as evidenced by John B. Scott (1936) who said of him, in a eulogy:

His own wide and varied interests were in themselves a source of pleasure to his friends and an inspiration to the College Library Committee. He was our Authority on many questions, but chiefly with those which concerned America and American life and thought.

In sport he took a prominent part, especially with regard to rowing. He occupied a seat in every College crew, except one, from 1936 to 1940. In 1937 he stroked the first victorious College crew in the Annual Extra-Collegiate Boat Race – a very fine feat indeed when it is recalled that our opponents were stroked by that redoubtable Interstate oarsman, Don Fraser.

The success which the College has enjoyed in this sport since 1936 has been due in no small measure to Mr. Anderson's enthusiasm and energy - and, we might add, to his powers of persuasion. For if ever a man could coax an unwilling crew from their studies to the boat on a rough day, it was he.

His organising ability was appreciated by both the College and the Guild of Undergraduates. He was twice co-opted to the Guild Council to assist them in the organisation of their more portentous undertakings such as Graduation Ball. He also had a prominent part in the affairs of the College Club during the past few years.

We owe him a debt of thanks not so much for what he did for the College and the University, as for the manner in which it was done – for the time so ungrudgingly given and for the efficiency and tact he displayed.

Charles joined the Citizen Air Force as an Air Cadet in October 1938, before war broke out. The following year there was a flurry of excitement in Narrogin when on 15 April a RAAF Hawker Demon "fighter bomber," a single-engine bi-plane, landed at the town's aerodrome to pick him up and take him to Pearce, to which 25 Squadron had recently been transferred from Laverton in Victoria. He had been called up for continuous service, interrupting the final part of his engineering studies.

Charles became a Pilot Officer, commissioned in September 1939, with 25 Squadron RAAF (City of Perth) at Pearce. The squadron was equipped with Australian-built Wirraways, which were supposed to both train flying cadets and provide the air defence for Perth, as well as fly anti-submarine patrols off Fremantle. He managed to obtain a release from full-time service in November 1939, and was placed on reserve, to complete his studies. He passed the final units of his course by November 1940 and returned to the active list in December.

Wednesday 19 February 1941 was a scorcher. The temperature reached 100.1 Fahrenheit at 4.30pm, and thousands of Perth residents flocked to the beaches in the evening. At 8pm Charles, who had agreed to take the place of a friend as the observer in an aircraft detailed for exercises with search lights, took off in Wirraway A20-125 from Pearce and headed to Fremantle. The pilot was 19-year old Flying Officer R.J. Sykes from Victoria, and the objective of the exercise was for the pilot and the Fremantle searchlight operators to train by pitting their skills against one another.

The next morning *The West Australian* reported:

With a crash which was distinctly audible to a large crowd spending the hot night on South Beach, a Royal Australian Air Force plane crashed into the sea off Fremantle at 8.35 o'clock last night. Naval launches quickly put out to begin a search, which was intensified by the arrival of an Air Force plane from which flares were dropped. The search was still being continued at an early hour this morning.

The plane as working in co-operation with an anti-aircraft searchlight unit in routine training. It had made several circuits within the radius of the beam when it appeared to bank and then crashed into the sea. A large crowd had been watching the work of the two units and they waited breathless as the plane dropped. Then, out of the beam of the searchlight, they lost sight of it, but a few seconds later a muffled explosion reached their ears.

There was a divergence of opinion among witnesses as to how the motor was running just prior to the crash. One witness said that it was the sound of the motor missing which first made him watch it, but another stated that the motor was running perfectly.

Within a few minutes of the crash naval cutters put out from Fremantle to begin searching for the wrecked machine, and they were assisted in

their task by the searchlight which had been co-operating with it. This light constantly swept the sea in a radius around where the plane was last seen and it was assisted by units mounted elsewhere in Fremantle.

One of the onlookers was John Scott.

“I was one of many who saw the search lights lock onto the plane at about 10,000 feet over the sea west of Cottesloe,” John recalled. “The pilot appeared to be blinded by the lights and the plane plunged into the sea with the loss of two young lives.”

Training to deal with searchlights was an important part of a pilot's skills. As pilots with Bomber Command were to discover on their bombing raids over Germany, once caught in a cone of enemy searchlights a plane had to be “thrown around the sky” to escape flak. The average survival time for a bomber illuminated by a cone was three minutes.

The Friday edition of *The West Australian* confirmed that both airmen had been lost. A fishing boat had found the wreckage in seven metres of water, three kilometres off South Beach. A diver went down and confirmed that the bodies of Charles and his colleague were still in their machine.

At the University's graduation ceremony not long afterwards, Charles was posthumously awarded his Bachelor of Engineering. He is buried at Karrakatta.

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“We honour him not merely because he was one of us – a Member of the College – but because of those fine qualities which earned him the respect and esteem of all those with whom he came in contact. Chief among these qualities was his ability to make friends and keep them.

“My sorrow at his leaving so soon is tempered by the knowledge that he would scoff in a good natured way at any inordinate display of sentiment.”

College Chapel memorial eulogy (by John Scott)