Shaw-Ross Airfield

Harry Turner Shaw and Hubert Galsworthy Ross founded the Shaw-Ross Engineering and Aviation Company in Port Melbourne on 8 January 1920. Both men had flown in the British Royal Flying Corps during World War I, achieving the rank of Major and Lieutenant respectively.¹ Aeronautical activities had started at Fishermans Bend a year before Shaw and Ross founded their company, when Graham Carey and A. Fenton established an airstrip on what was considered waste ground south of the rifle range in Graham Street.² The Shaw-Ross Engineering and Aviation Company was located at the Port Melbourne Aerodrome, ‘behind the sand dunes’ in Ferry Road (now Williamstown Road). It received the first Aerodrome licence issued in Victoria on 30 May 1921.³

The new company erected an aeroplane hangar measuring 70 feet x 50 feet; big enough for four medium-sized aircrafts. Shaw-Ross started with just two planes: an imported Avro 504K and a De Havilland DH-6.⁴ The company began offering joy-rides and charter flights to Victorian and Riverina towns, including delivering copies of the Herald newspaper to bayside holiday resorts.⁵

In 1921, the Shaw-Ross Company made history when it imported the Farman Sport. This became the first post-war aircraft imported and flown in Australia.⁶ That same year, however, the company made history of a different kind when Ross and two passengers were killed in an aeroplane crash in Port Melbourne on 22 May. The crash was one of the first aviation accidents in Australia to be officially investigated. The Superintendent of Aerodromes, Civil Aviation Branch suggested that the accident was caused by ‘the unfortunate jamming of the heel of Miss Dorman’s shoe, thereby rendering the rudder control useless and causing the machine to dive to the ground’.⁷

The Age described the crash sensationaly as ‘the most tragic event in the history of Australia aviation’:

Hundreds of people who had been watching the erratic manoeuvres of the machine, not knowing whether the pilot was performing “stunts” or whether the aeroplane was out of

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⁴ J.L. Kepert ‘Fishermens Bend – a centre of Australian aviation’, Department of Defence science and technology organisation aeronautical research laboratory, September 1993, p. 5.
⁵ J.L. Kepert ‘Fishermens Bend – a centre of Australian aviation’, Department of Defence science and technology organisation aeronautical research laboratory, September 1993, p. 6.
⁶ J.L. Kepert ‘Fishermens Bend – a centre of Australian aviation’, Department of Defence science and technology organisation aeronautical research laboratory, September 1993, p. 5.
control, were horror-stricken when in the next few seconds the machine fell with a thud which could be heard hundreds of yards away.\(^8\)

Pilot Hubert Ross, and passengers Cyril Harris and Jessie Dorman all died at the scene or shortly after.

The Shaw-Ross Engineering and Aviation Company continued to operate despite the tragic death of Ross. In 1922, Shaw flew the Farman Sport plane from Melbourne to Sydney and back, and was awarded the Oswald Watt Gold Medal for ‘the most notable contribution to aviation by an Australian or in Australia’.\(^9\) Shaw continued to play an active role in the development of Australian aviation, joining the committee of the Victorian Section of the Australian Aero Club and chairing the Air Convention lobby group.\(^10\)

The RAAF began to use the Port Melbourne Aerodrome for commuting to Point Cook. As a result, the federal government made some small modifications to the aerodrome to accommodate the increase in activity. However, by June 1928 the RAAF decided the field was no longer suitable because of encroaching sand, houses and powerlines.\(^11\) That same year, the Shaw-Ross Engineering and Aviation Company became the Shaw Aviation Company and in 1929 moved to the Essendon airfield. By 1931, however, the onset of the Great Depression and a mysterious fire meant that the Shaw Aviation Company had disappeared from the aviation industry completely.\(^12\)

\(^8\) *The Age*, 23 May 1921, p.7.
\(^12\) J.L. Kepert ‘Fishermens Bend – a centre of Australian aviation’, *Department of Defence science and technology organisation aeronautical research laboratory*, September 1993, p. 6.