

Walla-Warr

220 kilometres southwest of Katherine, Northern Territory, Australia



Walla-warr, that is what the local aboriginal elders called her; she was a particularly large Wedge-tailed Eagle. Wedge-tailed Eagles are one of the biggest raptors in the world and this particular bird boasted a wing span of over nine feet. Highly aerial, she could soar for hours on end, reaching 6000 feet or higher. Her keen eyesight extended into the infrared and ultraviolet bands helping her spot prey and to see rising thermals. She used the latter to gain altitude without as much as a flap of her massive wings.

At exactly 1301HRS on November 11 she was killed by an F-111 flying at over 600 knots just 200 feet from the ground. Flying through craggy rock gorges that were part of the Delamere Air Weapons Range in the Northern Territory, the F-111 using terrain-

masking techniques was just switching to manual flight. On impact the front windshield canopy had crashed in, severing the head-up display and spraying chunks of inner laminate into the right hand seat and the man sitting in it, he was killed instantly.

The F-111 airframe was A8-272 and had just been officially retired. When the accident happened the pilot in command had instinctively pulled back on the stick and retarded the throttles, his gut telling him they had suffered a bird strike. The jet seemed to be flying okay but his forward visibility was zero and his head was pinned to the backrest.

As the jet slowed and the several hundred-knot wind-blast abated he was able to check his companion. His worst fear was realized; his mate was gone, replaced by a bloody pulp made up of windscreen pieces, bird and person. The head was missing. He snapped his eyes back to the front and called in the emergency to ATC wiping the blood from his visor.

RAAF FLT LT Lance Hamilton couldn't remember the flight back. He landed back at Tindal without incidence stopping centre runway surrounded by emergency vehicles. The response crews leaped onto the wings to a sight most of them would never forget. Hamilton had alerted them to the situation but even that did not prepare them for this.

The cockpit was smashed in and the interior saturated in blood and guts. Squadron Leader Richard 'Horde' Alston sitting in the right hand seat was a mess, obviously dead. Hamilton on the left was covered in blood but alive, he flicked open his smeared helmet visor, still looking dead ahead. They helped him from the cockpit and during the entire process he never said a word. Neither did anyone else, it was eerie, a deathly silence had settled on the whole rescue procedure. Hamilton had sat stone faced in the back of the ambulance and let the medics check him over.

The rescue crew watched the ambulance drive off, time seemed to stand still. All of them knew Horde and Buckshot. This was Hordes home, most of them knew his kids, and this was a small

tight knit community. For a few moments no one turned around. But the F111 and their good friend still strapped into the right hand seat wasn't about to disappear like a bad dream. So one by one they began to move, the sick reality of what had happened weighing them down and the grim task of recovering their boss and their friend challenging their senses. The remaining ambulance waited. There was no hurry.



RAAF F-111G A8-272 on take-off – © George Canciani

You won't find this in the record books, and if you think A8-272 really got retired or this was to be one of Hamilton's scariest moments that would be mistaken; this was just the beginning of something much....much larger.

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