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# Remembering New Zealand's worst domestic air accident: 60 years since the Kaimai tragedy



By [Luke Kirkness](#)

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It remains New Zealand's worst domestic air accident, second only to New Zealand's worst-ever aviation disaster when Flight 901 crashed into the side of Mt Erebus during a sightseeing flight in Antarctica, killing 257.

At least one man survived Flight 441, Auckland businessman John Hardley, who later died of exposure before rescuers found the downed plane.

The soles of Hardley's feet were burned from walking about 50 metres from the plane, where he later died as he sat waiting.

Gauld, 80, was called in to help search for the wreckage and still vividly remembers seeing Hardley and the mangled and burned-out wreckage with many victims still strapped into their seats.

"It was horrific," he told the *Bay of Plenty Times*.

"[I remember] the blackened plane and the sight of people that had been killed. There were all these little bumps where people had died; it was a terrible sight.

"I can still see it when I shut my eyes 60 years on."

Flight 411 departed from Whenuapai Airport, north of Auckland, at 8.21am on Wednesday, July 3, 1963, bound for Wellington via Tauranga, Gisborne and Napier.

There were 20 passengers and three crew on board, with the flight to Tauranga due to take 40 minutes.

Weather conditions were stormy.

At 9.06am, the crew called the Tauranga control tower and requested permission to descend but the worsening weather had already blown the plane off-course.

Moments after air traffic controller Murray Christophersen cleared Flight 411 to descend, he lost contact.

At the foot of the Kaimais, Gordon quarry worker Errol Board heard the plane pass overhead, followed by the impact at 9.09am, when he immediately called the police.

The wreckage was found two days later on a ridge close to Mt Ngatamahinerua.

Gauld was a 21-year-old University of Auckland student at the time and a member of the tramping club, which asked him to join the search for the wreckage.

He and others arrived in the town of Gordon late on the Wednesday but it was deemed too dark to search for the wreck.

Search teams got out the following day and Gauld said the winter weather that week was “lousy” and the “rugged country” made it difficult to locate the plane.

By lunchtime, word came through it had been seen from another aircraft but it wasn't until Friday that Gauld and other searchers were flown into the area by helicopter.

He regretted not being able to search for the wreckage on the first night given the possibility Hardley, and others, could have survived the initial impact.

“Why on earth didn't we send a bunch of really competent people to find the crash on the first day?”

A public inquiry later found several factors contributed to the crash, including inferior navigation equipment, stormy weather that was not adequately forecast, and the fact the Kaimais were not classed by Civil Aviation as mountainous terrain — leading to the pilot believing it to be safe to descend, and do so according to regulations.

However, the main cause was a severe downdraught that pushed the plane down faster than it could accelerate to counteract the plunge.

Forecasts underestimated the force of the wind and during the flight's descent into Tauranga, it was caught in a turbulent downdraft and crashed into a ridge close to Mt Ngatamahinerua.

A 60th-anniversary service will be held at the roadside memorial on Old Te Aroha Rd, near Gordon, at 9am today.

Aviation historian and chaplain Reverend Dr Richard Waugh said it would likely be the final time for some relatives with a living connection to 1963 to gather and pay their respects.

He said the accident was the result of “a number of awful things that came together”, with the likes of the forecasting not being as sophisticated as they should have.

“This accident sits head and shoulders [above others] in terms of severity in what was supposed to just be an ordinary routine domestic flight.

“It’s still the worst accident domestically in New Zealand and goes to show that there are many lessons learned and aviation today is remarkably safe.”

Later, at 1.30pm today, a new commemorative display will be opened at the Classic Flyers Museum at Tauranga Airport.

Classic Flyers chief executive Andrew Gormlie said the right-hand engine, right-hand landing gear and the rudder trim tab - the tail-end piece of the aircraft - would be on display.

“It won’t be many generations before this is just history and isn’t significant to people,” he said.

“But aviation history in New Zealand is very rich, and this being the largest onshore disaster, and now we have something physical from the craft to remind us what’s happened.

“People are welcome to come and have a look at that — it’s significant because it’s exactly the same day too, 60 years later.”

***Luke Kirkness is an assistant news director for the Bay of Plenty Times and Rotorua Daily Post covering general news. He previously worked at the NZ Herald for three years, mainly as a consumer affairs reporter. He won Student Journalist of the Year in 2019 at the Voyager Media Awards.***

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