

In 1977 a light aircraft crashed into Mount Ben Lydia at Afterlee, New South Wales, killing all on board. Thirty-two years later the family of air crash victims Petra and Rait Kerma met some of the people involved in the search and recovery and in so doing found answers and ultimately resolution.

The Night the World Changed

© Peter Ray Kerma 2013

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form of by any means without prior permission from the author.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data

Author: Kerma, Peter Ray, author.
Title: The night the world changed / by Peter Ray Kerma ; edited by Jenny Cook ; photographs by Robert Kerma.
ISBN: 9780646909899 (paperback)
Subjects: Kerma, Rait--Family.
Kerma, Petra--Family.
Aircraft accidents--New South Wales--Kyogle.
Aircraft accident victims--Australia--Biography.
Aircraft accident victims' families--Australia--Biography.

Other Authors/Contributors:

Cook, Jenny, editor.
Kerma, Robert, photographer.

Dewey Number: 363.124099443

Peter Kerma
49 Atherton Street
Downer ACT 2602 Australia
T: (02) 6166 2640 or +61 2 61662640
E: peterandwendykerma@homemail.com.au

Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version ® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. All rights reserved worldwide.

Cover artworks by Mark Davis
Editing by Jenny Cook, PenUltimate, Canberra
Photographs by Robert Kerma
Illustrations by Peter Ray Kerma

Contents

Preface	v
I remember it like it was yesterday	1
Life before the accident	5
What happened	11
Afterlee—first impressions	15
Day one on Mount Ben Lydia	19
Time to reflect	27
Time to plan	29
Second visit to Afterlee	31
Day two on Mount Ben Lydia—locating the crash site	35
Day three on Mount Ben Lydia—working at the crash site	41
Group visit to the crash site	45
Time to relax	51
Third visit to Afterlee—resolution	57
Reflections	63
Attachment 1: Location of tree the aircrafts wing clipped	68
Attachment 2: Plaque at the tree on ridge	69
Attachment 3: Aircraft accident investigation summary report	70
Attachment 4: Aircraft crash site	71
Attachment 5: Bruce and Christine O’Neill	72
Attachment 6: Family at crash site	73
Attachment 7: Plaques at crash site	74

Preface

This story describes, from my point of view, events surrounding a fatal light aircraft crash, including the affect on and discoveries made by the family of Petra and Rait Kerma. The story is as factual as I could make it but is influenced by time and memory, feelings and emotions.

Peter Ray Kerma

I remember it like it was yesterday

While my Pop, two brothers and I settled in front of the television after dinner, my Nan walked across the room and picked up the ringing telephone.

Expecting the call to be from Mum and Dad, we strained to hear the conversation. Nan said with a smile, 'Oh hi, fancy hearing from you'. I thought it must be someone Nan knows, but not Mum or Dad. Then, as I watched, her smile vanished and was replaced by intense concentration, which quickly gave way to anguish. Pop saw something was wrong and before he could reach Nan, she cried, 'My babies ... all of them ... gone'. Pop leapt to Nan's side as we children watched helplessly from the lounge. Nan looked at Pop and said, 'The plane crashed, they're all dead'. Pop's face contorted with agony and his hands pulled at his hair. 'The kids; they're gone?' Nan nodded.

Pop writhed and leapt around the room like a man being tortured from within. The person on the other end of the telephone was trying to impart more details to Nan, but her eyes were fixed on her husband, and despite her agony she was desperately trying to grab him as he twisted around the room crying, 'No ... no ... no'. She eventually grabbed him and clung to him. His feet were now anchored, but his torso was still twisting and surging; one arm was around Nan's shoulders, but the other was still pulling at his hair.

I looked at my brothers, as they watched the scene of horror before them. Robert had tears running down his cheeks, and my youngest brother Ray glanced from Nan to Pop, and back at us trying to ascertain if what was happening was real.

Nan and Pop were now in each other's arms. All movement had stopped, but was replaced by loud cries of agony, for at that

moment, torment had completely swamped our grandparents' minds. I imagine the reality that their children were no more must have been magnifying all thoughts and memories of them.

I remember thinking that this was doing my brothers and me no good; for at that moment we were reduced to being spectators, despite having lost the parents who held us together. By this time we children were standing near the front door, arms around each other, tears streaming down our faces. For a brief moment I let go of my brothers and hurried over to my grandparents. I flung my arms around them, but all the acknowledgement I received was a fleeting glance from Pop as he momentarily put his hand on my head before resuming his noisy chant of, 'no ... no ... no, my kids, no ... no'. His eyes were staring out into nothingness and once again he raised his arm to pull at his hair. I walked back to my brothers, put my arms across their shoulders and walked them outside.

The night was cool; the stars were bright and clear. The pleading and crying emanating from the house was loud and constant and I felt a desperate need for quiet, to no longer hear the agony consuming Nan and Pop. We walked to the backyard, between the downstairs workshop and the machinery shed. From there the noise was faint and we soon became aware of the quiet crisp night air.

We lay on a patch of grass staring at the stars, and talked about what we'd witnessed. We wondered what it would mean for us.

Soon our chatter slowed and eventually the only sound heard was an occasional sob. I've no idea how long we lay there, but we finally became aware that the house was now silent and that the night air was colder than we'd realised. We began to shiver, which seemed to magnify each remaining sob, but the house was the last place we wanted to be. I also became aware that the questions that had once flooded my mind had also slowed and were now replaced by the realisation that nothing would

ever be the same for us. But along with this thought there was a deeper reassuring thought that despite what had just happened something bigger than us must be holding everything together.

It was Sunday 13 November 1977; I was thirteen, Robert was eleven and Ray was seven.