

The man who chronicled ‘litany of lies’

‘Most New Zealanders of a certain age can remember exactly where they were on the evening of 28 November 1979...many shared a mounting sense of dread as it became apparent that Air New Zealand flight TE901, with 257 people aboard, had disappeared...’

So begins a chapter in James Hollings’ compendium of NZ’s best investigative journalism over 150 years. It records the work of John Macdonald, the *Auckland Star* aviation writer who uncovered the most likely cause of the Erebus disaster. Air New Zealand largely blamed its pilot, but others – Macdonald, experienced Air New Zealand pilot Gordon Vette, and Justice Peter Mahon, who headed the inquiry – were convinced pilot Jim Collins was given the wrong co-ordinates.

Mahon’s damning summary, rejected by the Muldoon government, has remained in our lexicon for a single phrase the judge applied to Air New Zealand’s submissions - “an orchestrated litany of lies.” In 1983, Macdonald and Vette co-authored a book titled *Impact Erebus*. A significant portion is based on Macdonald’s meticulous research.

I’m telling you this because although John Macdonald lived a typically peripatetic journalistic life in several parts of the world, he spent part of his formative years in Taranaki where his father ran a veterinary practice, and he retired to New Plymouth. He died last week aged 86.

I worked with John Mac at the *Auckland Star* for a decade and, like the rest of that vast newsroom in the late 70s, 80s, respected him as one of the paper’s best rounds-people. He was a role model for me, newly arrived from the provinces in 1976; he was left alone to produce his superbly written stories, an effective defence to the chief reporter’s roving eye looking for someone to investigate the sometimes fanciful news suggestions emanating daily from the editor’s conference.

Later, when I went to Auckland Tech (now AUT) to run the journalism school, my first class included John’s son, also John, who now lives in New Plymouth and has had a similarly distinguished career, especially as a reporter for the world’s largest news agency, China’s Xinhua. John senior was one of the first “foreigners” invited to work there in the 1980s, an experience repeated by his son.

An informal “service” was held for Macdonald at his Huatoki St home, a gathering of family and friends that heard many wonderful anecdotes about his career. He was born in South Africa in 1931, after his mother crossed the Limpopo River from Southern Rhodesia to get to a maternity hospital. The family returned to the UK in time for World War II, when his father, also John Macdonald, became a radar technician on the Dorset coast.

Brother Robert – a journalist and author, like a third sibling, Andy - recalls John’s fascination with aircraft probably began as the family crouched under the kitchen table during German bombing raids: “He scared the hell out of us because he could tell by the engine noise whether it was a German bomber above us.”

Their father took up an invitation to be a vet in New Zealand before the end of the war. The family followed on an ancient coal-fired liner in 1945, an eventful journey because several crew - including a skipper who paced the bridge speaking with ghosts - were suffering post-traumatic stress from the war convoys.

At 16, John joined the RNZAF in 1950 and trained as an aircraft engineer, based at Ohakea. Robert says they are in fact mourning him for the second time – he was presumed killed in the Tangiwai train disaster on his way north at Christmas 1953. In fact, he’d bought his first motorbike to ride home and it broke down in the Kaingaroa State Forest. He got to his much-relieved family at Te Awamutu two days late.

He quit the air force after eight years, having served in Malaya and Cyprus. With Robert’s encouragement (Robert was at the *NZ Herald*) John began as a reporter at the *Waikato Times*. He then worked for the *Melbourne Age* for a decade, on one occasion displaying his deft touch with a true story about a bull in a china shop. He returned with his young family in 1972 to join the *Auckland Star*.

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In retirement, he furthered a life-long interest in painting, producing one controversial work of a husband and wife sans clothing. It was rejected by the Real Tart gallery, but the *Daily News* came to his aid, not only publishing a photo of the painting but an account of the debate.