

On the morning of Tuesday, the 26th, the Acting Prime Minister (Mr. Nash) and the Minister of Defence, at the request of the Director of Civil Aviation, called at the control room. That more space was required was obvious, and, after consultation, it was agreed that a room be set aside at Bunny Street headquarters for a Press Relations Officer, who was to be given all incoming information. To this officer was assigned the duty of handing out information to the press. On this task this officer was engaged practically the whole of each day the search was carried on. During the period of the search no complaint was made to him by any representative of the press of any difficulties or obstruction placed in the way of journalists to obtain information. No suggestion has been made that better arrangements could have been made which would have given the press quicker and more reliable information of the steps taken to locate the plane and the progress of the search.

On the evidence, I think the only possible inference to be drawn from the Ministers' visit to the control room is that they were as anxious as the public in general that information should be given to the public and that all steps were taken to carry out an effective search. It is true that, while the change of rooms and the arrangements for further space was being made, some slight delay in answering telephone inquiries from pressmen may have ensued, and some pressmen put to some slight personal inconvenience, but beyond that, on the evidence, I am satisfied all information relative to the search, garnered from messages, was, when checked, handed to the press, when asked for, without delay.

Four reporters of Wellington newspapers gave evidence of the steps they took to obtain information about the progress of the search operations. In the main their method was to telephone (one reporter said every half-hour) to the Air Control room at Stout Street, and ask if any information had come to hand. Occasionally they went to the control room, and later to the Bunny Street room, to find out from an officer engaged there whether there was any news for them. They started this process of asking for what, I understand, pressmen call "hand-outs" on the day following the report that the plane was missing, and continued it till Friday, the 29th, when the wreckage was discovered on the slope of Mount Ruapehu. On the Tuesday following the Saturday the plane was missing telephone inquiries met the response that information was not being handed out from the control room. This response, following upon the visit of the Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, was assumed by reporters, for a reason I have not been able to fathom, to indicate that information was being withheld by order of the Acting Prime Minister, despite the fact that they were informed that a Public Relations Officer, quartered at Air Headquarters in Bunny Street, had taken over the task of handing out information, and application for news could be made to him.

The reporters who gave evidence on this phase of the proceedings were in cross-examination asked to particularize their grievances and give instances where obstructions had been placed in their way. I gathered from their evidence their real grievance was that they had not been given information that came to hand from a searching plane at 8.40 on the morning of Friday, the 29th, to the effect that a searching plane had sighted an object that might be wreckage on the slope of Mount Ruapehu. The pilot asked for leave to land, obtain binoculars, and make a further investigation. One of the reporters claimed that whether the material sighted was the wreckage of the plane or not, it was valuable news that he could have liked and was entitled to have.

In the Search and Rescue Log Book this message reads :—

Time 8.40. "Message from C.47 ZAQ. Have sighted what might be aircraft wreckage on S.W. slopes Ruapehu. Request permission to land at Ohakea for binoculars."