

51st IAA HISTORY OF ASTRONAUTICS SYMPOSIUM (E4)
History of Australia's Contribution to Astronautics (3A)Author: Ms. Kerrie Dougherty
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KEN ATOCK: AUSTRALIA'S FORGOTTEN ROCKETEER

Abstract

In 1998, the author presented a paper on the two groups calling themselves the Australian Rocket Society. In researching the Melbourne ARS, a reference was found to an otherwise unknown mail rocketeer by the name of Ken Atcock, about whom virtually no information could be discovered at the time. As it transpired, a misspelling of the surname in the original reference had rendered this interesting young rocketeer 'invisible' to research.

Recent research by a relative has now brought to light the story of James Kenneth Atock, known as Ken, a high school student with a passion for rocketry, who became Australia's youngest known pre-War rocketeer. In 1936, aged just 15, Ken designed, built and launched an experimental mail rocket at Fisherman's Bend, Melbourne. He also built a second rocket that was never flown. An academically gifted student, Ken wrote newspaper articles about the latest international developments in rocketry: his own experiments were also widely reported in Australian newspapers. Sadly, Ken's potential to become Australia's most important pre-Woomera rocket experimenter was never realised, due to his premature death in 1941, while attempting to escape from a POW camp in Crete. His experimental rockets are, however, preserved in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and his memory commemorated by a scholarship at his former school, to support students' academic performance in scientific education with an emphasis on space and rocketry.

This paper will outline the short, but inspiring, life of Ken Atock. It will present his rocket experiments and examine his connections with the Australian Rocket Societies and international rocket experimenters in the 1930s.