

# Britain's Newest Bomber Burns At Bransgore

C.T. January 18, 1952



MOST of the wreckage of the Vickers Valiant jet bomber which crashed at Harrow Hill, Bransgore, last Saturday afternoon, has now been cleared away and much of it is undergoing close laboratory inspection.

Few air disasters could have had so many eye witnesses, and within a few minutes of the giant bomber plunging to earth crowds of people rushed to the scene. The Valiant, one of Britain's top secret aircraft, was becoming a familiar sight to the people of Christchurch and district since it had been undergoing trials from Hurn Airport.

Almost everyone automatically looked skywards when the machine roared overhead, and it was not to be wondered, therefore, that scores of people gazed in alarm when they saw it coming in from the sea on Saturday afternoon with flames trailing from one wing.

"The trail of flame got longer and longer, and then the wing dropped off," an eye witness told the Christchurch Times.

Vickers' chief test pilot, Mr. E. R. Grice, who was in charge of the machine, had radioed that the crew were baling out. As the machine came over Hinton people saw five men leap from the machine. Four of them got down safely by parachute, but the other. Squadron Leader Brian Foster received multiple injuries and was dead when a doctor arrived.

## HAMPERED BY CROWDS

An eye witness of the crash was Dr. E. W. Deane, who was standing in his garden at Mudeford when the machine went over in flames. He immediately got into his car and drove to the scene. He was greatly hampered in getting to the members of the crew because of the crowds of people blocking the roads. Eventually he had to get into a police car before he could make any headway.

One of the crew landed in a tall tree, from which he was unable to get down. He was badly shaken but appeared to be suffering more from cold than anything else as he was only in his shirt sleeves. He was eventually rescued with the aid of a fire escape.

Almost before the blazing plane had hit the ground calls went out to fire brigades at Christchurch, Bournemouth, New Milton, Lymington, and de Havillands at Somerford and within a few minutes' fire engines were converging on Bransgore. Christchurch brigade were among the first to arrive. "We were there within seven minutes," said Leading Fireman Ron Bryant. "Parts of the plane were scattered over a wide area and kerosene was blazing fiercely."

Air Ministry security officers were quickly rushed to the scene and a large area was cordoned off to prevent souvenir hunters carrying off fragments of the machine.

## OFFICIAL STATEMENT

The Valiant, many features of which were still highly secret, was said to be nearing the completion of its tests. An official statement issued by the Air Ministry and Ministry of Supply shortly after the crash said: "The destruction of the Valiant was caused by accidental fire in one of the engine bays. Fortunately the aircraft had already completed sufficient test flying to show that it fully met the Air Staff requirements, and the accident will not therefore entail any changes in the plans for its production."

The other members of the crew in addition to the pilot who got down safely were Mr. J. N. Montgomery, of Essex Avenue, Christchurch; Mr. Prothero Thomas, of New Road, Bournemouth; and Mr. G. L. Holland, of Exeter Road, Bournemouth.

In view of the fact that parts of the bomber were scattered over a wide area, the Christchurch police have asked that if anyone finds fragments of it they should at once notify the police and ensure that the parts are not removed.

The inquest on 29-years-old Sqdn. Ldr. Foster was opened by the Southampton County Coroner Mr. Bernard Harfield, at Christchurch on Wednesday, when only medical evidence and formal evidence of identification were given.

Dr. E. W. Deane said that he was standing in his garden at Mudeford when he heard the machine go over. He looked up and followed its course until it crashed. "I immediately got into my car and drove towards Hinton," he continued. "I was then directed to a lane where I found a man lying just inside the hedge. I found that he was dead and that he had been bleeding profusely from the mouth and nose."

Witness said there were also severe bruises on the left side of the face and blood coming from the ear. He formed the opinion that the primary cause of death was a fracture of the base of the skull. Dr. Deane then described other multiple injuries to the lower part of the body which he discovered on a subsequent examination.

Evidence of identification was given by deceased's commanding officer, Squadron Leader D. E. Davis. He said that he had known Sqdn. Ldr. Foster for two years, and that his home was at Kedale Road, Seaford, Sussex.

# Crash Victim May Have Struck Bomber's Fin

C.T. January 25, 1952

AT the resumed inquest at Christchurch on Wednesday on 29-years-old Squadron Leader Brian Foster, of Seaford, Sussex, who died from injuries received when he parachuted from the Vickers Valiant jet bomber just before it crashed in flames at Bransgore on January 12th, the jury came to the conclusion that he was rendered unconscious as he left the aircraft.

The pilot, Mr. G. R. Bryce, who with three other members of the crew got down safely by parachute, was questioned about the ejector mechanism of the seat in which Sqdn.-Ldr. Foster was sitting, and he said that from discussions he had had with doctors from the Institute of Aviation and Medicine he had been led to believe that the seat struck the fin of the aircraft. The Coroner, Mr. D. H. B. Harfield, asked whether the striking of the seat against the fin could have caused deceased to have been rendered unconscious. Mr. Bryce replied: "I would say it was very likely. But the striking of the seat on the fin did not interfere with the opening of the parachute."

Replying to a member of the jury, Mr. Bryce said that the ejection of the seat did not automatically open the parachute. He understood from the experts that a certain amount of damage had been done to the release mechanism of the seat as a result of hitting the fin and this released the parachute.

"Then it was released by Providence, so to speak," commented the Coroner.

## FIRST OUT OF THE PLANE

The members of the crew were called to give evidence in the order in which they left the aircraft. First was Mr. Gordon Roy Holland, an aerodynamicist of Messrs. Vickers Armstrong Ltd., and he said that about 45 minutes after the Valiant took off on a test flight from Hurn he received orders to prepare to bale out. "I was first out of the plane and when I was able to look around I saw three other parachutes fully developed. I wondered where the fourth was. I landed in a tree at Hinton Admiral," said witness, who added that when he left the aircraft Sqdn.-Ldr. Foster was sitting quite normally in his seat.

Mr. Geoffrey Nicholas Montgomery, flight test engineer, said that he definitely had an impression that when he himself left the plane Sqdn.-Ldr. Foster's seat was vacant. On the way down he identified two of the parachutes—that of deceased and Mr. Thomas.

"When I landed I went through a wood and across a ploughed field where I saw Mr. Thomas, who had landed quite close to deceased. Mr. Thomas told me that deceased was badly hurt," said witness, "but I understood from Mr. Thomas that he was still alive."

Similar evidence was given by Mr. John Bernard Prothero Thomas, a flight test observer.

The pilot, Mr. Bryce, said that when he gave the order to bale out, Sqdn.-Ldr. Foster prepared to do so but did not bale out immediately. "When I realised that he had not gone I tapped him on the arm and pointed to the roof which had been blown off," continued witness. "I thought he was waiting for the others to go first. His delay in baling out did not interfere with his safe exit from the plane."

Sidney George Shutler, a farm worker from Bransgore, said that he saw the burning aircraft fall to the ground, and he noticed that deceased was hanging doubled up in his parachute as though he was unconscious.

## SAW CRASH FROM STATION

Evidence was also given by P.C. Fuller, who saw the crash from Holmsley railway station. He later saw deceased on the ground and formed the opinion that he had not landed in the manner in which a man would have done had he been conscious.

The jury returned a misadventure verdict, expressing the opinion that deceased was unconscious as his parachute descended.

On behalf of Messrs. Vickers Armstrong Ltd., Mr. A. L. Cooper expressed sympathy with the relatives of Sqdn.-Ldr. Foster.

# Scouts Search For Bomber Wreckage

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WITHIN 24 hours of receiving a request from the police and Air Ministry a search party of between 70 and 80 Boy Scouts from Christchurch and District had combed an area of two square miles near Hinton Admiral last Saturday for pieces of the Vickers Valiant jet bomber which crashed at Bransgore on January 12th. They found many pieces of the aircraft, the largest being a four foot long strip of metal. They also came across part of one of the seats.

The request for a search party was received by the District Commissioner, Mr. A. S. Carlos, and the preliminary organisation was carried out by the Assistant District Commissioner, Capt. H. Gibson.

The Scouts assembled at Hinton Admiral station, and under the supervision of three police officers carried out the search in small groups.

Christchurch Fire Brigade have made an unsuccessful attempt to retrieve a parachute which became entangled in the top of a 70-foot tree.