

Dramatic Eye Witness Story Of Highcliffe Plane Crash

Error Of Judgment Was Cause, Says Coroner

C.T. March 22, 1947

TWO MINUTES AFTER ITS LAST RADIO CONTACT HAD BEEN MADE WITH HURN AIRPORT, A TWIN-ENGINE DE HAVILLAND DOVE AIRCRAFT WAS A SHATTERED, BLAZING WRECK ON CHEWTON COMMON, HIGHCLIFFE, ON THURSDAY OF LAST WEEK ... A WOMAN, TERRIFIED LEST HER TWO CHILDREN WHOM SHE WAS TAKING HOME SHOULD BE HURT, RAN AS FAST AS SHE COULD WHEN SHE SAW THE MACHINE CUT THROUGH TELEPHONE WIRES BELOW ROOFTOP LEVEL

These two dramatic pieces of evidence were given when the inquest was held at Christchurch on Monday on the three airmen who lost their lives in the crash.

The 'plane, which took off from Hurn Airport in the afternoon during perhaps the only brief bright period in the weather, attracted the attention of several people in the Highcliffe district, by reason of its low altitude, and one witness was of the opinion that the pilot was looking for the aerodrome at the time of the crash.

The dead airmen were: Capt. Ronald George Buck (35), a single man whose home was at Worcester Park, Surrey; Mr. Thomas Marcel Blanch (39), married, of 46, Friendship Road, Bristol; and Mr. John Joseph Beattie (22), single, of Helensburgh, Dumbartonshire. They were all attached to B.O.A.C. at Hurn Airport. Capt. Buck was the pilot of the machine, Mr. Blanch a technical officer, and Mr. Beattie the test observer.

The Southampton County Coroner, Mr. Percy B. Ingoldby, sat with Mr. Warren, a senior inspector of the Ministry of Civil Aviation. Mr. J.P. Swaffin and Mr. Farnsworth watched the proceedings on behalf of B.O.A.C.

BODIES BADLY CHARRED.

Medical evidence was given by Dr. G. M. Brooks, of "Kenilworth," Stour Road, Christchurch, who said that he examined the bodies of three airmen in the mortuary. That of Capt. Buck was badly charred and Mr. Beattie had been decapitated. The third airman had extensive injuries, including a fractured thigh and a fractured base of the skull.

Percy Charles Silk, an aircraft inspector for B.O.A.C. at Hurn Airport, told the Coroner that the aircraft left the airport at about 4.20 p.m. He had previously inspected it and it was airworthy. The altimeter was set in the morning, but would have to be reset by the pilot before taking off if the barometric pressure had altered. No one knew whether the altimeter was reset.

In an endeavour to ascertain who was responsible for the plane taking off, the Coroner called George O. Bryers, B.O.A.C. inspector in charge of development flight, and he said that orders for the plane to be taken out would come from the pilot in charge. "It really rested with him whether he started or not. We could not stop him from flying providing the machine was serviceable," he said.

TOOK OFF DURING BRIGHT PERIOD.

Questioned about the weather, witness said that it had been misty all day, but the aircraft took off during a bright period.

Further evidence about weather conditions was given by Norman Robert Norfolk, of Ringwood Road, Hurn, who said he was on local control duty at the airport at the time. "Cloud was about 1,200 feet and visibility about three miles when the aircraft took off," he said. "It got worse afterwards."

The Coroner: He appears to have been circling round before the crash, do you think he was trying to land?

Witness: I think it was very likely that he was looking for the aerodrome when he crashed.

Continuing, witness said he had been in radio communication with the plane and that the last message received was at 6.6 p.m. The crash was approximately two minutes later.

Harold George Newbiggin, aircraft flight test engineer, of "Highcroft," Chestnut Avenue, New Milton, said that at 6 p.m. on the day of the crash he was cycling along the Lymington Road in the direction of New Milton, and when he reached Humphrey's Bridge he heard a twin engined aircraft to the north of him. He heard the machine on several occasions afterwards and as he approached Chewton Glen it "broke cloud" just overhead. The engines were running quite smoothly. Visibility was about 500 feet at ground level.

"Ten or fifteen seconds later I heard a crash some distance to the rear, but I did not associate it with the plane," said witness.

EYE WITNESS OF THE CRASH.

An eye witness of the crash, Mrs. Lilian May Beaton, of 30, Upper Gordon Road, Highcliffe, told the Coroner that she was walking home from Glenville Road with her two children and she heard the plane when she turned into Elphinstone Road. "It was very low and coming towards me, but the engines were running quite regularly and I thought it was under control," she continued. "Next I saw it over Lymington Road and it was trailing a lot of wires. It was only a few yards above the ground and below the level of the houses. It then hit the ground and burst into flames, I ran as soon as I saw it hit the telegraph wires because I knew it was going to crash and I was terrified for the safety of my children."

Evidence of hearing the aircraft come over very low was also given by Stephen Alexander Stone, a hairdresser, of 25, Upper Gordon Road. He heard the crash and ran to the scene. He could not get very close because the wreckage of the machine was burning very fiercely. The body of one man was lying by the side of the machine.

Fl/Lt. Peter Walter Derham, of 201 Sqdn., Calshot, who lives at 25, Upper Gordon Road, Highcliffe, said he was in his house when he heard an aircraft come over exceptionally low. He went to the door but the machine had disappeared. "I took note of the weather," continued witness. "The cloud base was about 60 feet and discipline visibility on the ground was from 150 to 200 yards and there was a slight drizzle at the time."

SAW THE GLOW OF A FIRE.

"I heard a crash and I instinctively looked at my watch. It was 6.8 p.m. I then went outside and saw the glow of a fire in a coppice," went on witness.

He then described how he rushed to the scene of the crash and seeing one of the airmen lying by the machine, searched for some evidence of identification. He took a wallet from the man's pocket and from papers in it found that the name of the man was Blanch.

Further questioned about the weather, witness said "I was of the opinion that the fog was such that low flying was definitely unsafe."

P.C. Dudman, who was on the scene shortly after the crash, said that the machine came down about 200 yards from his house. He sent for the fire brigade and ambulance. He

said that the heat from the burning wreckage was too great to get near it and after the fire brigade had extinguished the flames it was not possible to carry out any investigation as there was danger of the fire starting again if the foam was disturbed.

He revisited the scene the next morning, and removed the bodies of Capt. Buck and Mr. Beattie.

SNAPPED TREE AND TELEGRAPH POLE.

Describing the course which the machine must have taken before the crash, witness said that a tree had been snapped off and a part of the machine's tail plane was suspended in an adjacent tree. After striking the tree the machine snapped off a telegraph pole.

This concluded the evidence, and the Coroner said that he understood that an enquiry was being conducted by the Air Ministry. He did not think that there would be any point in adjourning the inquest until the conclusion of the Ministry enquiry, as he felt that any evidence from such enquiry would be purely negative. It was impossible to determine from examination of the wreckage whether the instruments were in order or not, as after a crash of that nature they must inevitably have been shattered. The cause of the accident in his opinion was an error of judgment in the fog. "I have come to the conclusion that this was misadventure," continued the Coroner. "It was a perfectly proper operation that was being carried out."

On behalf of the police, Sgt. Wyatt expressed thanks to Fl/Lt. Derham for the assistance he gave at the time. "He made our job very much easier," added Sgt. Wyatt.

The Coroner and Mr. Swaffin, on behalf of B.O.A.C. expressed sympathy with the relatives.