

SECRET WAR FLIGHT DISASTER REMEMBERED

A GROUP OF SCHOOL CHILDREN ARE INVOLVED IN A PROJECT TO RESEARCH THE LOSS OF A DE HAVILLAND FLAMINGO IN APRIL 1942

WHEN an aircraft carrying a fact-finding mission crashed into a field near the Yorkshire village of Great Ouseburn at 17.25 hours on 30 April 1942, it prompted high-level questions about whether the aircraft involved had been subject to sabotage, writes **Steve Lumley**.

The aircraft in question was a de Havilland D.H.95 Flamingo – a pre-war design for a high wing, twin-engine civilian airliner of all-metal construction. Described in February 1939 as “a design of the newest formula”, just sixteen examples (one prototype, twelve civilian and three military)

were built. The Flamingo which crashed at Great Ouseburn, serial number R2764, had passed its final test flight at Hatfield on 10 February 1940, and was requisitioned by the Air Ministry some eight weeks later. It was operated by 24 Squadron, a communications and transport squadron which flew a wide range of aircraft.

The object of the flight on 30 April 1942, was to take four representatives of the Russian Military Mission on a tour of inspection and fact-finding mission ahead of a top-secret visit by the Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov. Also on board were six RAF personnel.

to Hendon. When approximately 3½ miles north of Great Ouseburn, Yorks., and flying at a height of about 2,000 feet a defect developed in the starboard engine which caused No.7 cylinder to become detached from the crankcase. A fire broke out almost immediately in the neighbourhood of the starboard engine nacelle and was of sufficient intensity to cause the starboard wing to break off at a point just outboard of the engine bearers and also to cause the starboard engine to break away.”

“The fuselage, port wing and port undercarriage unit fell to the ground and burst into flames. All the occupants were killed.” Debris was scattered across the Yorkshire countryside as far as three miles away.

The nature of the squadron’s work and the passengers carried in its aircraft prompted concerns about the Flamingo’s safety. Indeed, just



Earlier the same day, the Flamingo, flown by 35-year-old Pilot Officer Iain Ramsay, had flown to East Fortune via Kirton-of-Tealing. The Accidents Investigation Branch’s report into the crash provides the following account of subsequent events:

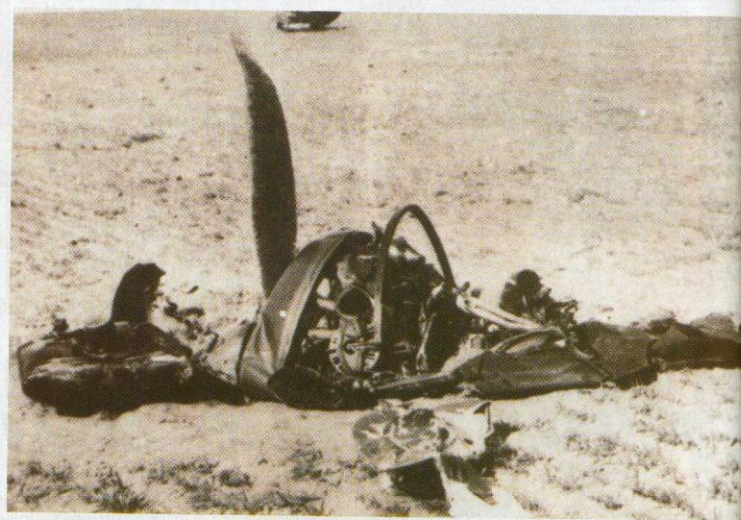
“At 16.25 hours the Captain took off from East Fortune to fly back

LEFT:
The starboard wing of de Havilland D.H.95 Flamingo R2764 pictured where it fell to earth near Great Ouseburn in Yorkshire. (National Archives)

BELOW:
When the crash site was examined recently a sheet of scorched aluminium and the instrument face from a fuel gauge (seen here) were recovered. (Courtesy of Richard Allenby)



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seven days before the crash Flamingo R2766 had carried the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, and two days earlier the same aircraft had transported Lord Louis Mountbatten (the pilot was Pilot Officer Ramsay). Churchill himself had twice travelled in a Flamingo in 1940. On one occasion he was accompanied by Charles de Gaulle – the pair flew in the very aircraft that plummeted to earth at Great Ouseburn in April 1942.

Perhaps it was with this in mind that Churchill wrote to Sinclair on 6 May 1942, and asked: "... Is the Flamingo considered a safe aircraft for leading people?" Seven days later the Prime Minister was assured that it was.

The crash is just one event that fifty schoolchildren are examining as part of a three-year education project called "Hand on the Past", organised by the Thornborough Trust and supported with a £40,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Air historian Richard Allenby, who has spent many years researching wartime aircraft crashes throughout Yorkshire, is also helping this particular part of the project. Last November he and fellow air historians Ken Reast, Albert Pritchard and Eric Barton set about tracing witnesses to this crash. One of those who came forward was Margaret

Stead of Moortown, Leeds. Now aged 84, Margaret lived in Great Ouseburn during the war.

She recently visited Boroughbridge Primary School as part of the "Hand on the Past" project, and spoke to the children of the events of 30 April 1942.

"When the 'plane crashed, we were having our tea", she recalled. "There was suddenly the most peculiar noise in the air above. It sounded as if it was coming right over our heads and was very frightening.

"We rushed outside and there was a big bang, then I just saw pieces of metal flying everywhere down the village street. I picked up a piece of twisted metal and kept it for several days afterwards as a souvenir, but these men kept coming back and searching in the fields so I decided to give it back."

Through the testimony of the eyewitness, official reports and contemporary photographs, Richard Allenby and his colleagues were able to locate the crash site. With the permission of the landowners, a number of small fragments of the aircraft were located.

"The crash report refers to the wreckage being taken to RAF Linton-on-Ouse to be inspected

ABOVE LEFT:

This piece of wreckage shows a de Havilland part number with the "95" prefix; the Flamingo design number was the DH95. The piece also carries a de Havilland inspection stamp. (Courtesy of Richard Allenby)

ABOVE RIGHT:

The Flamingo's starboard engine with the top section of the port rudder in the background. (National Archives)

BELOW LEFT:

An annotated view of the main area of wreckage. (National Archives)

by both the Air Ministry and the Russians which suggests that very little was left at the site at the time", Richard said.

"What I think we found was a small crater which was backfilled with odd bits of wreckage collected after the RAF had left the site and then soil thrown on top. It was certainly close to where the front end of the aircraft crashed – the instrument face was one clue, but there were lots of tiny bits of varnished plywood in the area. The Flamingo had a cabin interior of such a finish."

Richard added: "Rumours abound that the Russians were buried in a Harrogate cemetery but there's no evidence for this. I find it likely that their bodies were returned home but research is ongoing."

During the investigation that followed the crash, it was noted that "special importance is attached to this accident" because of the presence of the Russian personnel. In order that the Russian government should have no reason "to suspect that anything was being hidden from them", permission was granted for two officers to attend the RAF Court of Inquiry.

Both men were encouraged to question witnesses through an interpreter, and were shown the wreckage which had been collected together at Linton-on-Ouse. They were also taken to No.16 M.U. where they studied the remains of the starboard engine.

"It must be recorded," ran the words of one report, "that the relations with the Soviet representatives were most cordial throughout the proceedings and they seemed to accept readily the findings of the Court ..." The Russians, it seems, concurred that the events surrounding the crash were not suspicious; it had been a tragic accident. ■

