

The crash of Bristol Beaufort AW288 at Roscroggan Chapel

Introduction

At five to nine on the morning of Friday 24th July 1942 a Bristol Beaufort twin-engine torpedo bomber, AW288, of 86 squadron RAF crashed into the disused Roscroggan Chapel. All four of the crew perished at the scene.

The pilot, Flight Sergeant John Campbell Atkinson

The observer, Pilot Officer Frank Samuel Day

Wireless operator/Gunner Sergeant Charles Richard Taylor

Wireless operator/Gunner Sergeant John Orford Twelvetrees

Background

The squadron was due to re-equip with Liberators in the autumn of 1942. In preparation for this they were flying their Beauforts to Malta, where they were to be used to attack the convoys carrying supplies to Rommel's Afrika Korps. The aircraft were flown to No. 1 OADU at RAF Portreath where the crew rested for a week before taking off five minutes prior to the crash.

The accident

The following is taken from a letter received by us from the Air Historical Branch of the RAF.

“Our records about this accident say that the aircraft was on the strength of 86 but was being handled by No 1 Overseas Aircraft Delivery Unit for despatch overseas and was being ferried by a crew of 4 from Portreath to Gibraltar. The weather on the morning of 24 July 1942 was variable with a cloud base varying between 200 and 800 feet above airfield level. At the time of take-off the cloud was 9/10 at 800 feet with visibility of 3 miles, surface wind west south west 10 mph. The cloud was 2000-3000 feet thick. The pilot was instructed to take-off on a runway bearing 230° and to climb up on his first track of 240° through the cloud. The position of the crash and subsequent reports indicated that the aircraft was attempting to return to the airfield; this was presumed to be because of some defect.

The aircraft took off at 0850 hours from Portreath in a south westerly direction. The cloud base was low. At 0855 hours the aircraft crashed into a chapel at Roscroghan from a direction which indicated that the aircraft was circling or returning to Portreath. Various eyewitnesses gave statements but these were not consistent; some said they saw smoke coming from the aircraft engines but others denied this. The accounts mostly agreed that the aircraft circled and that the engine note increased immediately before the crash. There is no mention of another aircraft in the vicinity.”

The RAF's accident report card is inconclusive; the aircraft was burned out and there was no physical evidence left of any fault that had developed prior to impact. We know from the RAF Pilot's Notes manual for the Beaufort that it was almost impossible to fly if one of its two engines had failed. We reason that most defects other than engine failure would have allowed the machine to retain its power and return to base so we believe that one engine had failed or was failing. At least one eyewitness (one not interviewed by the accident investigators) mentions that the engine could be heard misfiring as the plane passed over Camborne. The fact that it circled shows that the controls were working. With a crew of four and a full load of fuel and ammunition the plane was far too heavy to maintain its altitude if an engine failed. The auxiliary fuel tank carried in the bomb bay could not be jettisoned nor could much of the fuel in the regular tanks. Very little could be jettisoned and no eyewitness reports we've seen suggest that anything was. The pilot had no choice but to descend below the cloud base and look for somewhere to bring the plane down. Unfortunately the cloud base was low that day giving him insufficient height to return to RAF Portreath.

The crew

With the exception of the observer, Frank Samuel Day, the crew were posted to 86 squadron in February 1942 straight from training. As they had previously trained together we believe that they were posted as a complete crew. Day had been at the squadron since the previous summer; we don't yet know why he was drafted into the crew, although we do know that he had been in hospital immediately prior to that. We also don't know whose place Day took in the crew as we believe that a complete crew would have been posted from training to the squadron. Before the summer of '41 Day served as an observer in Bristol Blenheims with 248 squadron.

The pilot was John Campbell Atkinson of Rhodesia. Most of what we know about him is from his RAF service record. John was born in Messina in South Africa on the 28th October 1918 and attended Milton High School in Bulawayo in what was then Rhodesia. He enlisted in the RAF on the 13th September 1940 and did his pilot's training in Rhodesia and South Africa before being sent to Britain at the end of September 1941. He spent two months at No.5 Operational Training Unit learning to fly the Beaufort and completed his torpedo bombing course. We have been advised that it is likely that John already had some pilot's training as his progress through the courses was otherwise inexplicably rapid. It's possible that John learned to fly at Bulawayo Flying Club or that he was employed by De Havilland, who had a subsidiary in Rhodesia at that time. He was posted to 86 squadron on the 16th February 1942 and was killed in action

on the 24th February of that year at the age of 23. He was interred in Illogan Cemetery² on the 31st.

The Observer was Frank Samuel Day. Again, much of what we know about Frank comes from his RAF service.

Frank was born Frank Samuel Deitchman in Hackney on the 21st July 1914. His father Nathaniel was a theatrical agent. We don't know when the family changed its name but shortly after the start of WWI seems very likely in the circumstances. We know nothing of Frank's life prior to enlisting with the RAF Volunteer Reserve, which he did on the 30th August 1939. He enlisted in Newcastle although by the following year he was recorded as living in Golders Green in London. He was called up on the 9th October and was posted to his first operational squadron, 248, on the 23rd March 1940, being promoted to Acting Sergeant the next day. This appointment was made permanent on the 29th September. With 248 squadron he flew in Bristol Blenheims, which were used for anti-shipping raids, convoy escort and reconnaissance missions. The observer's job in the Blenheim was a triple role; Frank would have performed the duties of navigator, bomb aimer and photographer. In the June of 1941 the squadron was converted to Bristol Beaufighters and, after a period of retraining, Frank was posted to 86 Squadron.

Frank was either injured or ill early in 1942; his service record shows that he was discharged from a Royal Navy hospital in Plymouth on the 26th February 1942. We do know that 86 were based at St Eval at the time; we don't know why Frank was in hospital.

After being promoted to Temporary Flight Sergeant on the 1st May 1942 Frank was discharged from the RAF on the 3rd May and then commissioned as a Pilot Officer (Observer) on the following day. He was “Killed on Active Service” on the 24th July, three days after his twenty-eighth birthday. The job title “Observer” was later changed to “Navigator” – a more accurate description of the role.

Charles Richard Taylor was one of the Wireless Operator/Air Gunners. We have been able to trace his family and have better information about him.



The following is an extract from an email from Paul Taylor, Charles’s nephew.

“Charles was born in Dawley in Shropshire on the 28th July 1917. His mother Annie Holmes Taylor was an infant school teacher and his father Charles Herbert Taylor was a skilled pattern maker in the Coalbrookdale Foundry which is now linked to the World Heritage Site at Ironbridge. His father later began a successful menswear shop and was a well known local councillor. Charles attended a local private primary school [there were a lot of local pay schools prior to the development of the state system] and later went to Wellington Grammar School in Wellington, Shropshire. I too went to this school and I recall that there was a plaque recording the war dead which included my uncle, Charles. After the Grammar School, I believe that [as my father did] Charles must have attended the Walker Technical College in Oakengates where he would have studied and developed an interest in radios and electronics.

Charles and his younger twin brothers Allan [my father] and Gordon [born 25th December 1919] were very keen cyclists and I have a number of photos illustrating this interest, including the involvement of a wide circle of friends. They routinely cycled as far as Jersey Marine near Swansea to visit relatives.

Prior to the outbreak of war [I would guess in 1938] Charles and Allan opened a radio and cycle shop in Dawley High Street [now part of Telford]. Both were interested in practical radio construction and Charles built a radio for his parents that remained in their house at Dawley Bank for many years.

Charles was regarded as handsome, was popular with local girls and was a good dancer. He was a bright and capable person and undoubtedly had he survived the war, would have had every chance of carving out a successful career in business.

I understand that my father was the first to volunteer on the outbreak of war, with Charles volunteering a little time after [probably once he had had the opportunity to close the shop at Dawley]. I am not sure where he undertook his basic training [probably Abbotsinch or Leuchars] and there seems to be little recall of his service record between 1939 and 42.”

According to Charles’s service record he volunteered on the 16th January 1940 and, after various training courses, was, like John Atkinson, posted to 86 squadron on the 16th February 1942. Charles died four days short of his twenty-fifth birthday.

The other Wireless Operator/Gunner was John Orford Twelvetrees. We have also managed to contact Orford’s family, who have given us letters and photographs.

Orford was born in Ireland and later became the stepson of Mr SH Twelvetrees of New Bolingbroke when his mother remarried. He too was an academic type and he also worked in the family business, a general store in the village. Although he was both gifted and studious the economic situation of the time did not permit him to attend university, which the school’s head master was keen on him to do. He attended Spilsby Grammar School on a scholarship from 1931.



Orford's service record shows that he trained with Charles and John before they were posted as a crew to 86 Squadron. A letter from Orford to his older sister Norah reveals that he was stationed at RAF Portreath for a week before his fatal flight. He spent his afternoons here bathing and the evenings dancing or at the cinema. He asked his sister to remind him to Betty, presumably a young lady from the village.

Further information

There is much more information available; you can contact us on our dedicated email address beaufort.aw288@gmail.com or by writing to

Mark Steele
14A Pumpfield Row
Redruth
Cornwall
TR15 3PX.

We will have a website soon where we will post all the information we have and update it as more information becomes available.

Thanks and acknowledgements

The people who helped us in our research, in no particular order; Wally Twelvetrees, Paul Taylor, Helen Stratford Ross McNeill, Lewis Walter and virtually everybody who ever lived in what was then Rhodesia, Chloe Mayer, Phil Marriot, Lesley Perry and her crew at the Chesham Museum, Edward McManus, Robert Franks, Ron Bramley, the Air Historical Branch of the RAF and so many more that we could fill the entire leaflet with just this one paragraph. Our apologies to those we've not had space for here.

The people and organisations that took part in the memorial; the Camborne branch of the Royal British Legion; Mayor Jean Charman and her colleagues on Camborne Town Council; the Royal Air Force and everybody else who made the event possible.

This leaflet is dedicated to Mrs Ella Whear; she has been both very helpful and inspirational to us in our quest for knowledge.