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Author: Robert PALMER, M.A.



Bristol Beaufort Mk. I X.8931 L2
No. 5 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit

THE LAST FLIGHT OF:

BEAUFORT L.9808

A narrative of the last flight of Beaufort L.9808, which crashed near R.A.F. Chivenor on the night of 10 October 1941, killing the pilot and sole occupant, F/Sgt H. H. NETTLETON.
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The Last Flight of Beaufort L.9808

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Author: Robert PALMER, M.A. (copyright held by author)
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Introduction

Researching into events during the Second World War can be very rewarding, but it can also be frustrating, and sometimes confusing. When the accounts and records were compiled some eighty years ago, one can have little doubt that the authors of these documents had little regard or concept that someone would find their documents interesting so far in the future. Typewriters were in short supply early in the war, so a lot of documents were handwritten, which can sometimes be difficult to decipher. It also becomes apparent to any researcher, that errors were made in original documents, and often these have been compounded over the years.

One such case where the evidence is conflicting is in the loss of Beaufort L.9808 on 10 October 1941. That the aircraft was operating from R.A.F. Chivenor is not in doubt, nor that the aircraft was allocated to No. 5 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit ((C) O.T.U.) based there. What is confusing is the status of the pilot and sole occupant of the aircraft when it crashed. The pilot, Sergeant H. H. NETTLETON, was a pre-war member of the Royal Air Force. He had enlisted as ground crew but had later been accepted for training as a pilot. NETTLETON was posted to No. 217 Squadron at R.A.F. St. Eval as a pilot however, he was flying from R.A.F. Chivenor when he died. Some records state that he was serving with No. 217 Squadron, others that he was with No. 5 (C) O.T.U.. What complicates matters is that at the time of his death, No. 217 Squadron had a detachment operating from R.A.F. Chivenor for the fitting and trials of Air-to-Surface Vessel (A.S.V.) radar. This is not mentioned in the Operations Record Book (O.R.B.) of R.A.F. Chivenor, but it is contained within the O.R.B. for No. 217 Squadron. This is his story.

The Bristol Beaufort

The Bristol Beaufort was the standard torpedo bomber and strike aircraft of the Royal Air Force Coastal Command from 1940 until 1943. It replaced the Vickers Vildebeest biplanes, which were obsolete by the outbreak of the Second World War. The Bristol Aeroplane Company Limited, based at Filton, on the northern outskirts of the Gloucestershire city which name it bore, developed the Beaufort in response to two Specifications issued by the Air Ministry. Specification M.15/35 was for a twin-engine monoplane for use as a torpedo bomber, and G.24/35 for a general reconnaissance bomber. The prototype Beaufort (L.4441) first flew on 15 October 1938, and the Air Ministry issued a contract to build seventy-eight aircraft to the Specification 10/36.

The production aircraft differed from the prototype in several details, but they were still essentially of the same design. The aircraft was a monoplane torpedo-bomber, with a crew of four: pilot, observer, wireless operator and air gunner.¹

¹ Observers were trained as navigators, bomb aimers and gunners, but in September 1942, the Air Bomber (or Bomb Aimer) became a separate trade, and the Observers were redesignated as Navigators. Most of the pre-September 1942 Observers retained their 'O' brevet rather than use the new 'N' half-wing Brevet. Confusingly, those post-1942 Navigators posted to Coastal Command were also trained as Air Bombers. In addition, Coastal Command did roll the wireless operators as air gunners, so that they were versatile and could perform both roles.

It had an all metal, stressed skin construction, and weighed 13,107 lbs (5.85 tons) when empty, and 21,228 lbs (9.5 tons) when fully loaded. The aircraft was powered by two, 1,010 horsepower (hp), Bristol Taurus Mk. II air cooled, radial engines. In service, these were found to be underpowered for the aircraft and its use, so Bristol Taurus Mk. VI engines were installed, each of which delivered 1,130 hp. The Beaufort Mk. IA was fitted with the Bristol Taurus Mk. VI and XII engines, but was otherwise similar to the Mark I.

The Beaufort had a wingspan of 57' 10", a length of 44' 7", a height of 12' 5", and a wing area of 503 square feet. The maximum speed of the Beaufort was 265 mph at 6,000 feet, with a cruising speed of 200 mph. Its range was 1,035 miles in normal operation, with a maximum range of 1,600 miles. The endurance of the aircraft was six hours, and it had a ceiling of 16,500 feet, although this was used rarely. The Beaufort was armed with two 0.303 machine guns in the nose (although not in all operational Beauforts), and two in the rear turret. Some aircraft had a rear-facing 0.303 machine gun installed in a blister under the nose, and two beam guns. The bombload was 1,500 lb of bombs, or one 1,605 lb, eighteen-inch torpedo semi-enclosed in the bomb bay.

1,013 Beaufort Mk. I aircraft were built by the Bristol Aeroplane Company Ltd. at Filton, and at a shadow factory at Banwell, Somerset. The Australian government built additional Beauforts in Australia for use by the Royal Australian Air Force. The only other major version of the Beaufort was the Mark II. This was fitted with two, American Twin Wasp S3C4 engines, with the prototype flying in November 1940. The Twin Wasp engines developed 1,200 horsepower, but other than a few improvements made through operational experience, the basic aircraft was the same. The Beaufort squadrons found that the Taurus equipped aircraft performed better in temperate climates, but the Twin Wasps were better in hotter and more humid climates. 415 Beaufort Mk. II and Mk IIA aircraft were built before production ceased in 1944. Total production was 2,129 Beaufort aircraft, including 700 built in Australia.

Operational Deployment

The Bristol Beaufort first entered R.A.F. service in November 1939, with No. 22 Squadron, based at Thorney Island, Hampshire. The Beauforts superseded Vickers Vildebeest biplanes, and were a marked improvement in aircraft design. The conversion to the new aircraft continued until the last Vildebeest left in February 1940. The unreliability of the engines, and a marked tendency to swing on take-off, led to some lack of confidence in the new aircraft. The issue of the unreliable and underpowered engines was to remain with the Beaufort for most of its service with the R.A.F.. It was apparent that the weight of the aircraft was such that it could not fly successfully on one engine. An engine failure at take-off, or while flying at low-level as most sorties were, was likely to prove fatal; as was proved at No. 3 (C) O.T.U., and its successor.

A problem arose as it was realised that although the R.A.F. had a new torpedo bomber, it had no torpedo capable of being dropped from the Beaufort. The simple issue was that the design of British air-launched torpedoes had fallen behind the improvement in aircraft design. The torpedo in use at the time was the Mk. XII, which had been designed during the First World War to be fired from Motor Torpedo Boats. The most modern Royal Navy torpedo carrying aircraft was the Fairy Albacore, a development of the Fairy Swordfish that remained the principal R.N. torpedo bomber. These were biplanes, with a top speed of about 160 mph, and very different from the Beaufort.

On 8 April 1940, No. 22 Squadron moved to North Coates in Lincolnshire, to cover the North Sea, in consequence of the German invasion of Norway. The first operational sortie by No. 22 Squadron using their Beauforts was on the night of 15/16 April 1940, with a mine-laying operation in the mouth of the River Jade. The squadron dropped their first bomb on 7 May 1940.

The second squadron to receive the Beaufort was No. 42 Squadron. This unit had been formed in August 1939, from a flight of No. 22 Squadron. It was equipped with the Vickers Vildebeest biplane torpedo bomber but received its first Beaufort (L.4489) in April 1940. This coincided with a move to R.A.F. Thorney Island in Hampshire, to replace No. 22 Squadron which had moved to North Coates. The move was to allow the conversion of No. 42 Squadron to the Beaufort. In June 1940, with the conversion completed, the squadron moved to R.A.F. Wick, in Caithness, to fly operational sorties over the North Sea to Norway.

The third squadron to be equipped with the Beaufort was No. 217 Squadron. This pre-war squadron had been based at R.A.F. Warmwell, Dorset, at the outbreak of the Second World War. In October 1939, it moved to R.A.F. St. Eval in Cornwall, to cover the Western Approaches. It received its first Beaufort in May 1940, just after No. 42 Squadron started to receive its Beauforts.

Pre-war, No. 48 Squadron was a training squadron specialising in air navigation, but in September 1938, it was transferred to Coastal Command for maritime patrol duties. It was equipped with the Avro Anson and on 25 August 1939, it was posted to R.A.F. Thorney Island in Hampshire. It received its first Bristol Beauforts in May 1940, and in July, it moved to R.A.F. Hooton Park in Cheshire. The delivery of Beauforts was so slow that in November 1940, No. 48 Squadron gave up its Beauforts which were allocated to No. 217 Squadron instead with effect from 19 October 1940. No. 48 Squadron, which had only flown one sortie with the Beaufort on 17 October 1940, continued to use the Anson until it converted to the Lockheed Hudson in June 1941.

No. 217 Squadron remained at R.A.F. St. Eval until October 1941, when it moved to R.A.F. Thorney Island, Hampshire, however, the squadron maintained a detachment at R.A.F. St. Eval. No. 217 Squadron remained a bomb (and mine) only squadron, well into 1941, before torpedo training was undertaken, however, the squadron had a trials detachment at R.A.F. Chivenor testing A.S.V. radar, and the use of depth charges.

The fourth, and last, squadron in the U.K. to receive the Beaufort was No. 86 Squadron. This squadron was formed at R.A.F. Gosport, Hampshire, on 6 December 1940. The new squadron was equipped with Bristol Blenheim Mk. IV aircraft. It spent a month at R.A.F. Leuchars in Fife, in February 1941, and moved to R.A.F. Wattisham in Suffolk in March 1941. It moved to R.A.F. North Coates in May 1941, where it began to receive Beaufort aircraft in June of that year. The first Beaufort sortie was flown on 11 June 1940, but in practice, it acted as a holding and dispatch unit for No. 39 Squadron in Egypt. The Beaufort Mk. II was issued to No. 217 Squadron beginning in November 1941, and to No. 86 Squadron with effect from January 1942.

The early sorties were against targets in Germany, mainly the naval bases on the north coast, and the area of Heligoland. The aircraft were armed with bombs, meaning that they were specialist aircrew attacking a standard target suitable for bombers. The opening of hostilities in Norway meant a realignment of the sorties undertaken by the Beauforts. On 21 June, No. 42 Squadron conducted a strike against the battlecruiser Scharnhorst off Norway. There were no hits on the German warship, but the weakness of the defensive armament of the Beaufort was exposed, especially when attacked by the German Me 109 aircraft now based in Norway.

To counter this, Beaufort sorties were usually given escorts, with Beaufighters becoming common in this role. Due to the limitations of engine power, additional armour could not be fitted to the aircraft. Shortly after the Scharnhorst incident, persistent trouble with the engines led to all the Beauforts being grounded for a period, and for a time, it was a possibility that the aircraft would be declared unsuitable for operational duties. On 28 August, the Bristol Aeroplane Co. Ltd. agreed to fit an improved version of the Taurus, the Mk. VI, and this allowed No. 22 Squadron to resume operations on 31 August 1940. No. 217 Squadron resumed operations on 25 September, followed by No.42 Squadron three days later.

With the fall of France, the German Navy took over French ports in Brittany, and on the Bay of Biscay. This led to another change in the tasking of the Beaufort squadrons, with attacks against French ports, in particular Brest, becoming frequent. No. 22 Squadron undertook its first sortie with torpedoes on 11 September, and then a new form of sortie commenced four days later, when the first 'Rover' patrols were flown. Prior to this, the R.A.F. relied on aircraft carrying out reconnaissance sorties, and then if they found something of interest, radio back for a strike force to be dispatched. This introduced delays, so that most strike sorties failed to locate any meaningful targets. The Rover patrols were an attempt to overcome this, by dispatching aircraft, often armed with a mix of torpedoes and bombs, so that any target of opportunity could be attacked. The first success with a torpedo came on 17 September, at Cherbourg, when the small merchant vessel Johann Blumenthal was sunk by either L.4508 or L.9790.

No. 42 Squadron gained its first success on 26 October, with two ships being torpedoed off the coast of Norway by L.9813, and N.1159, but both aircraft were shot down. New bombs were introduced late in 1940, being modified sea mines, but these could only be carried by Beauforts and Hampdens. Bremerhaven was attacked with these bombs on 25 October, by five aircraft from No. 22 Squadron.

No. 22 Squadron gained further success on 18 September, with the sinking of a naval tanker, the sinking of Sperrbrecher 17 on 27 December, and the cargo-line Mar Del Plata on 26 March 1941. On 6 April 1941, three aircraft from No. 22 Squadron were tasked to attack the German battleship Gneisenau at Brest on 6 April. Flying Officer (F/O) K. CAMPBELL and his air crew flew in one of these aircraft and succeeded in hitting the German warship. The heavy flak brought the aircraft down in the harbour, and all four men died. F/O K. CAMPBELL was awarded, posthumously, the Victoria Cross for his selfless gallantry.

The entry of the Bismarck into the North Atlantic led to all three Beaufort squadrons being placed on readiness to attack the warship, when located. In addition, aircraft from the Torpedo Training Unit (T.T.U.) at R.A.F. Abbotsinch were placed on stand-by. No. 217 Squadron stood by at St. Eval, armed with bombs as they were not ready to fly with torpedoes until 8 July 1941. From mid-1941 onwards, the number of successful operations by the four-homebased squadrons declined. This was due to a combination of factors: shortage of torpedoes, and the shortage of experienced pilots and air crew.

The pilot aimed and dropped the bombs or torpedoes. They had to drop their torpedoes at low speed, about 160 mph, at a height of about seventy feet, and at a range of about 750 yards from the target, in order to achieve the likelihood of a hit against any target moving at speed. The course at the T.T.U. in Scotland taught pilots to drop torpedoes at small and slow (often stationary) targets, from a range of 1,500 yards, a situation not rectified until the Spring of 1942.

To obtain a hit, the pilot had to fly in the face of heavy light flak from the ship, or escorts, with a high degree of determination, discipline, courage, and hope. In the light of these facts, it is not surprising that a study undertaken in November 1942 revealed that flying a torpedo bomber was the most dangerous role in the R.A.F. at that period. A tour was intended to last for three-hundred hours operational flying, but only 17.5% of pilots survived one tour. If a pilot was fortunate to survive one tour, and commenced another tour, they had only a 3% chance of surviving both tours. In comparison, a day fighter pilot had a 43% chance of surviving one tour, and an 18.5% chance of surviving two, and for a night bomber pilot, the figures were 44% and 19.5%. The highest chance of survival came from flying Catalina flying boats, giving a pilot a 77% chance of surviving one tour, and a 60% chance of surviving two. In spite of this, the number of cases of men refusing to fly, and being labelled as 'Lack of Moral Fibre', was no worse than for other types and categories of flying duties.²

No. 489 Squadron, R.N.Z.A.F. was due to receive Beauforts in August 1941, at its base at R.A.F. Leuchars, but converted to Beaufighters instead. For a short period of time, No. 415 Squadron, R.C.A.F. operated some Beauforts while stationed at R.A.F. Thorney Island from September 1941, until January 1942. In the Middle East, No. 39 and 47 Squadrons operated Beauforts from August 1941 onwards flying from Egypt and Malta. By June 1943, both had converted to other types of aircraft. No. 39 Squadron had moved to Singapore from India at the outbreak of war, as a day bomber squadron.

² HADAWAY, Stuart *The British Airman of the Second World War* (Oxford, Shire Publications, 2013) p.33

In April 1940, it moved to Aden to support the British operations in Eritrea and Ethiopia. In January 1941, the squadron was tasked with maritime reconnaissance, and commenced equipping with Blenheim and Maryland aircraft. In August 1941, the squadron began to receive Beaufort torpedo bombers, acquiring aircraft and aircrews from No. 86 Squadron.

During 1942, the level of operations in the Mediterranean increased, and those in Home waters declined. This was because of the change of priorities, and the lack of targets for U.K. based squadrons. No torpedo hits were scored by any U.K. based Beaufort in 1942, and R.A.F. strike aircraft bombed no vessel larger than 400 tons. Attacks by No. 22 Squadron against the Scharnhorst in July 1941 were adjudged to have failed, as were another attack in May 1942 against the Prinz Eugen, with No. 86 Squadron even failing to find the German battle cruiser. Three of the four U.K. Beaufort squadrons were sent overseas in 1942. The first to leave was No. 22 Squadron, which left for Ceylon in February 1942. In June 1942, No. 42 Squadron left the U.K. bound for Ceylon, while No. 217 Squadron left in the same month for Malta. No. 217 Squadron later moved on to join the other two squadrons in Ceylon. No. 86 Squadron served at R.A.F. St. Eval between January and March 1942, and R.A.F. Wick from March until July 1942. In that month, it moved to R.A.F. Thorney Island, and commenced conversion to fly Liberators.

R.A.F. Chivenor was the only Operational Training Unit serving the Beaufort squadrons based in the U.K. and abroad, from its inception as No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit in late 1940, until 16 May 1942. It was redesignated as No. 5 (C) O.T.U. on 1 August 1941. On 3 May, No. 5 (C) O.T.U. began its move to R.A.F. Turnberry, on the west coast of Ayrshire, which was completed on 16 May. This ended one chapter in the history of R.A.F. Chivenor, but it allowed another to commence. From now on, R.A.F. Chivenor was to focus on the defeat of the U-boat and play a major role in the Battle of the Atlantic.

R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 5 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit

The North Devon Airfield was officially opened in April 1934 and comprised a large grass field of about 300 yards by 200 yards and a clubhouse and workshop buildings. The field was situated roughly where the officer's married quarters now stand, and the airport buildings were erected immediately to the south of the Barnstaple – Braunton railway line some 300 yards east of the Duckpool level crossing. Flights commenced to the island of Lundy in the summer of 1934 with a De Havilland Dragon aircraft, which in the following year were extended to provide 'on demand' services to Cardiff.

The first building work for the new Royal Air Force station began in May 1940, and on 21 June 1940, the first sod was removed to inaugurate work on the runways. The initial plans provided for three runways, each one-thousand yards long and fifty yards wide, on the alignment of the present runway layout. The building plans when completed left the Station virtually as it is today, the only major later additions being the two airmen's brick barrack blocks and the married quarters.

The eastern boundary of the airfield was extended in 1941 to take in the North Devon Airport, and between then and 1944 the east-west runway was progressively lengthened to its present two-thousand yards. In 1942, the dispersal pans and taxiways on the present married quarters site were constructed. Post-war, concrete aircraft servicing platforms were built, and the married quarters constructed on the site of the pre-war aerodrome. R.A.F. Chivenor was extensively rebuilt in the 1970's with all but one of the wooden huts replaced.

The first Royal Air Force unit to occupy the Station was No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit, administered by No. 17 Group, Coastal Command. Flight Lieutenant (F/L) E. D. BRADFIELD arrived on Friday, 25 October 1940, from R.A.F. Mount Batten in Plymouth to take up the position of Senior Equipment Officer, accompanied by Pilot Officer (P/O) A. C. SHARPE, who was posted from R.A.F. Gosport as an Equipment Officer on the same day. These two officers were the first personnel to be posted to the new R.A.F. Chivenor, to establish the new Operational Training Unit there. It opened formally on 27 November 1940 and assumed responsibility for operational training of Beaufort crews from R.A.F. Silloth in Cumberland. There were five Flights within No. 3 (C) O.T.U., allowing two courses to run concurrently for each aircraft type, and they were:

'A' Flt.	Bristol Beaufort
'B' Flt.	Bristol Beaufort
'C' Flt.	Avro Anson and Bristol Blenheim
'D' Flt.	Avro Anson and Bristol Blenheim
'F' Flt	Fairey Battle (later Westland Lysander) – for target towing

On 1 August, the unit based at Chivenor became No. 5 (Coastal) O.T.U.. This change of style does not seem to have altered the work of Chivenor in any respect as the conversion courses continued in an unbroken sequence and the personnel on the unit were the same. This came about because of the expansion of Coastal Command, with the added requirement to train crews on Whitley and Wellington aircraft. It had been intended to move the Beauforts to R.A.F. Turnberry, in Scotland, but this airfield was not ready in August 1941 to accept this unit. Hence, the training of Whitley and Wellington crews consolidated at R.A.F. Cranwell, with the training of Beaufort crews remaining at R.A.F. Chivenor. The O.T.U. at Cranwell was formed as a new unit although some personnel transferred from R.A.F. Chivenor to R.A.F. Cranwell. Other personnel and aircraft came from R.A.F. Silloth in Cumberland.

Most pilots were regarded as a 'cut above' above the other members of the crew. At this stage of the war, the officers were either pre-war members of the R.A.F. or were university educated. The formation of the crews was a lottery. Although the crews would fly, fight and sometimes die together, they lived separately at R.A.F. Chivenor and other bases. The officers lived in the Officers' Mess, and the sergeants, flight sergeants and warrant officers lived in the Sergeants' Mess.

No matter how close an officer was to his crew, all officers were to be addressed as 'Sir' or 'Pilot' if appropriate. Not all officers adhered strictly to this, but it appears that for most crews, some degree of formality remained in place.³

Most of the Wireless Operators/Air Gunners had been together through training at Blackpool and Yatesbury, and so tended to know each other well. They were generally working class men, often qualified in a trade, from across the U.K.. Wireless Operators/Air Gunners generally had lower educational attainment than the pilots or observers, or they were older and over the age limit for becoming a pilot (25 years). They would often stick together at the O.T.U., and sometimes chose their captains rather than the other way around. They wanted a steady driver, one most likely to ensure their survival. They chose the men that they could care to live with, and possibly die with.⁴

When not on duty, some men would go swimming at Croyde, and others would go into Barnstaple drinking. They would take a bus at about 5.00 pm, but there was no bus back. Some men used to sleep in railway carriages at Barnstaple, and one morning a Sergeant was absent at breakfast. Then he phoned up, from Bristol, having slept on a carriage that formed an early morning train to Taunton and then onwards to Bristol.⁵

By the time that they reached R.A.F. Chivenor, the four men who formed an air crew had endured several stages of selection and assessment. This began with the initial interview and medical examination, the onwards through other training units with more exercises, tests and examinations. Generally, the pilots streamed for Bomber and Coastal Command were seen as:

- Being cool, steady and tenacious,
- To have stamina,
- To have initiative,
- Having powers of leadership.⁶

In terms of flying skills, they had to be reliable on the use of instruments and have a flying accuracy required to ensure efficient coordination between the pilot and navigator (observer). At no point was it explained to the other air crew how very dangerous their operational role was going to be. This was war, so everything was dangerous, and all the air crew were volunteers. All they wanted to do was to get on with it. There was no question in the minds of the young men training at Chivenor of transferring away from this role, and they had no chance to take a different direction; from the moment you joined up, you did as you were told. There was no choice. R.A.F. Chivenor took an official photograph of the students early in the course as soon as they had crewed-up.

³ MAYNE, Maurice with RYAN Mark *Down but not out – The incredible Story of Second World War Airman Maurice 'Moggy' MAYNE* (Stroud, The History Press, 2014)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ THORNING, Arthur G *The Dambuster who cracked the Dam – The story of Melvin 'Dinghy' YOUNG* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Aviation, 2008)

Of those in photograph of Course 7A, twenty died, one became a prisoner-of-war, four were injured and two were branded 'Lack of Moral Fibre' and taken off flying duties. Only Sergeant (Sgt) Bill CARROLL was destined to survive the war unscathed.⁷

The pilots were told that the Beaufort was challenging to fly, but it was seen as a tough little plane and it could take some punishment. Its twin Taurus engines were underpowered, and it was therefore difficult to fly if one engine failed. After every fifty hours of use, each engine would be inspected, and after every one-hundred hours, a more rigorous inspection would be carried out. Every two to three-hundred hours, each aircraft went for a major inspection and was stripped down, checked and reassembled.⁸

The pilot had to undertake a visual check around the aircraft, including checking to see that the cover had been removed from the pitot head, just under the nose. This supplied the air speed indicator which calibrated the pilot's instruments. Each pilot had to sign the Form 700 before they could take an aircraft up. It was also signed by the rigger and fitter, the rigger was in charge of the wings and the tail, the fitter in charge of the engines. How well they did their job could be a matter of life or death for the air crew. The aircraft were being treated badly almost every day by pilots who had no choice or did not know better.⁹

Pilots entered the aircraft by climbing on the wing and dropping through the top hatch straight into the pilot's seat. They completed the cockpit check – testing flaps, throttles, fine pitch and that the hydraulic system was working. The joystick was in front of the pilot with two handles, and the pilot would use it to move the ailerons on the wings and elevators on the tail plane, and then work the rudder by means of the foot pedals. The ground crew had a starting battery and they primed the induction system while they were underneath the engines. They used the electronic starter to rotate each propeller twice and switch on the starting magnetos. They then cleared the propellers, and the pilot shouted 'contact', and pressed the port starter button followed by the starboard one. The brakes were held on while the pilot tested each engine to full throttle in fine pitch, then the chocks were removed by arm signals.

The pilot would manoeuvre the aircraft by use of the engines, port to go right and starboard to go left, and make his way to the end of the runway to line up in order to take-off into the wind. Flaps 30 was selected and both throttles opened up together, the pilot would keep his right hand on the throttles and use his left hand on the control column. The rudder would be used to keep the aircraft straight as the torque of the engines would pull it to one side. The take-off speed was 80 knots and it would take about 700 yards to reach that speed. The pilot would ease back on the control column and would feel that special, subtle, sensation of being airborne.¹⁰

⁷ ALDRIDGE, Arthur with RYAN, Mark *The Last Torpedo Flyers – The True Story of Arthur ALDRIDGE, Hero of the Skies* (London, Simon & Schuster Ltd., 2013)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

Once airborne, the pilot would keep their right hand on the throttles and use the left hand to raise the undercarriage. At about 700 feet, the flaps would be raised and shortly afterwards the aircraft would reach its cruising speed of 140 knots. When landing, the Beaufort would be eased into the final approach, full flaps down, undercarriage down, so at about 80 knots a decent three-point landing could be achieved safely.¹¹

On Monday, 13 January 1941, No. 1 Course of Instruction, for Beauforts and Ansons, commenced, but the number of students on this course is not recorded. This course concluded on Sunday, 2 March 1941. These were the first students to undertake the two-month operational training course, including the formation of an aircrew of four to include a pilot, observer, and two wireless operators/air gunners. A general overview of the nature of the course was that it comprised three stages. These were:

- Weeks 1 and 2
 - Ground Instruction/Crewing Up/Familiarisation/Circuits and Landings,
- Weeks 3 to 6
 - Ground Instruction/Basic Air Training Day & Night/Bombing/Air Firing/Cine Gun,
- Week 7 & onwards
 - Ground Instruction/Applied Air Training/Cross Country/Advanced Navigation/Fighter Affiliation.

Elements of the training syllabus included:

- Synthetic training:
 - Link Trainer,
 - Bombing Teacher,
 - Clay Pigeon Shooting,
 - Turret Training,
- Gunnery:
 - Combat Manoeuvres,
 - Air-to-Sea Firing,
 - Air-to-Air Firing,
 - Fighter Affiliation,
- Bombing:
 - Bombing Target Practice,
 - Mine Laying,
- Navigation:
 - Dead Reckoning Navigation,
 - Cross-Country Navigation Exercises,
 - Cross-Sea Navigation Exercises,

¹¹ Ibid

- Drills:
 - Ditching and Dinghy,
 - Parachute,
 - Fire,
 - Crash,
- Operational Procedures:
 - Formation Flying,
 - Attack Profiles.

Throughout the course there were daily classroom lectures, navigational exercises, morse practice in the air and on the ground. The first element of the training programme at No. 3 (C) O.T.U. was for the pilots to be assessed by an instructor (also known as a Screened Pilot) and passed for solo flying. The instructors taught the pupil pilots to: *'Always trust your instruments'*, and not to rely on their instincts. Any conflict between a pilot's instincts and his instruments could result in spatial disorientation, particularly in cloud, and no doubt led to many aircraft stalling and crashing. Many pilots avoided flying in cloud, unless taking evasive action, for this reason.¹²

Once a pilot was passed as competent for flying solo, they would team up with an Observer (Navigator), and two Wireless Operators/Air Gunners (WOp/AG). It was the practice of Coastal Command to train aircrew as wireless operators and air gunners to allow flexibility in their duties, so they could interchange roles on long sorties to avoid becoming stale.¹³ The process for forming up crews was informal, with the pilots, observers and WOp/AGs all meeting up in a room and choosing their crews by discussions and then an instinctive decision.

The next stage for the crews was for the pilots to qualify for night flying. Many did their first sorties at dusk, before being passed for solo flying. It should be remembered that the aircraft of this period lacked many of the sophisticated flying aids fitted to modern aircraft. Most pilots relied on their experience, judgement, and luck. Each pilot went solo at night to do an initial circuit and bumps. In the dark, a pilot would take off and then turn to port to keep the flare path in sight while flying downwind. It was often pitch black for the pilots, with the blackout in force on the ground.

The O.T.U. course included navigation, bombing and air-combat exercises, with one of the last elements being formation flying. This was because the anti-shipping aircraft would usually fly and attack in 'vics' of three aircraft, so this skill had to be learnt. It was a perilous climax to the course. One pilot's misjudgement or lapse in concentration could result in a collision with one or both aircraft crashing.

¹² Ibid

¹³ See Footnote on Page 3.

Once the training programme was completed, the course would be concluded, and the crews posted. Most crews were posted as formed crews, although some would be split up according to operational requirements. Some crews were posted direct to either No. 22, 42, 86, or 217 Squadrons, the four Beaufort equipped squadrons in Coastal Command at this time. Other crews were posted to the T.T.U. at R.A.F. Abbotsinch, near Glasgow, and some were posted to prepare for deployment overseas to the Mediterranean.

On 1 August 1941, No. 3 (C) O.T.U. at R.A.F. Chivenor became No. 5 (C) O.T.U.. 24068 Wing Commander (W/C) P. D. CRACROFT, A.F.C. was appointed to the rank of Group Captain (G/C) to become the Commanding Officer, R.A.F. Station, Chivenor. The station was organised along the following lines:

<u>Royal Air Force Chivenor</u>	<u>No. 5 (C) O.T.U.</u>
Station Headquarters @	Maintenance Wing
No. 47 Works Flight	Training Wing
A.A. Defence Squadron	

Just three days into its new designation, the O.T.U. suffered its first loss. On 3 August, P/O D. M. BATLEY met with a fatal accident when his Beaufort N.4478 crashed one mile north of Croyde, North Devon, due to the supposed failure of one engine (but confirmation lacking). P/O H. J. ABRAMS also met with his death in the accident. 937544 Sgt N. C. J. COLES received slight injuries.

On 9 August, a Court of Enquiry was assembled at R.A.F. Chivenor at 10.00 hours to enquire into the accident involving Beaufort L.4478 on 3 August 1941. The day was also marked by the tragic loss of P/O S. H. LAST and his air crew in Beaufort L.9953 which was seen and heard by many personnel to dive vertically into the River Taw at 10.15 hours from a height of 500 feet. P/O LAST, and his Observer P/O V. J. HALL, and WOp/AGs Sgt WESLEY and Sgt FELL all died instantly in the violent crash only about half a mile from Chivenor. A Committee of Adjustment was formed on 11 August with S/L The Reverend R. H. BATE as the President and Warrant Officer (W/O) LOVELL, the Station Warrant Officer, as the sole Member. Their role was gather together and list the personal effects of the dead air crew from the crash of Beaufort L.9953, dispatch them to the Central Registry for transit to the next-of-kin, and to ascertain the assets and liabilities of each of them, to pay outstanding Mess bills and other debts, and then to send details of the remaining assets to the Casualty Section of the Air Ministry for the benefit of the next-of-kin. On 14 August. P/O A. R. MILNE-HENDERSON, A. & S.D. proceeded to Nottingham and returned to the unit on 16 August. This was possibly in connection with the repatriation of the bodies of Sgt WESLEY and Sgt FELL to their home city of Nottingham and to represent the base at their funerals.

Captaine R. MOIZAN, Free French Air Force, was posted to Chivenor on 16 August: the first foreign airman to serve on the unit, he was the forerunner of many more members of the Commonwealth and Allied Air Forces. On the same day, Sous Lieutenant (S/Lt) R. CASPARIUS, F.F.A.F. was posted to R.A.F. Chivenor from No. 3 Personnel Reception Centre. On 17 August, No. 7 Anson and Beaufort course was completed. No. 9 Anson and Beaufort course commenced on 18 August.

There was another fatal air crash on 27 August when Avro Anson L.7072 failed to return from a local wireless training exercise. The pilot was S/Lt Karol SAPIEHA, F.F.A.F., a French national of Polish heritage, and a Prince in this distinguished Polish/Lithuanian family. There were three Sergeants wireless operators under training on-board, and all four men were reported 'Missing, presumed dead'. In fact, a farmer had witnessed this aircraft crash off Hartland Point, although he was not able to raise the alarm until about eight hours later. There were no survivors.

On 30 August, the fourth fatal air crash in the month occurred with the loss of Beaufort N.1160 while on a bombing exercise about ½ mile off Saunton Sands. The pilot, A/400149 P/O K. T. LITTLE, R.A.A.F., observer NZ/404383 P/O G. D. DOOLE, R.N.Z.A.F. and the two wireless operators/air gunners 1261741 Sgt D. R. READER and 1283171 Sgt F. P. PILKINGTON all died in the violent crash.

At the end of August, it was reported that the monthly serviceability of aircraft was only 42%. The demand for aircrew by the operational squadrons being what it was at that stage of the war, it is not altogether surprising that the quality of the products sometimes suffered. An example of this is provided by the accident figures: the flying effort at this period was averaging about 1,700 hours a month and yet in August there were eight flying accidents, four of them fatal.

A series of postings was made on 1 September to formally transfer the officers from No. 3 (C) to No. 5 (C) O.T.U., even though for the officers concerned it was no more than a paper exercise. All took effect from 8 August 1941. No. 8 Beaufort and No. 8 Anson Courses were both completed on 14 September. Seven Australians, two New Zealanders and six British officers were posted to the T.T.U. at R.A.F. Abbotsinch, Renfrewshire. On 17 September, No. 10 Beaufort course commenced, but no Anson course was run concurrently as had been the case previously. G/C CRACROFT attended the opening of the Barnstaple Fair at the Guildhall in Barnstaple to represent R.A.F. Chivenor.

On 7 October, No. 5 O.T.U. lost one of its Flight Commanders when Anson N.5197 crashed into the sea in Morte Bay. The pilot was 39339 Squadron Leader (S/L) P. C. ROLT, with 64894 P/O D. A. ALLMOND acting as wireless operator. In addition, there were two naval officers on-board, both of whom were serving on a H.M. Motor Launch based locally. The four men died when the aircraft crashed into the sea and none of their bodies were recovered for burial. The weather was overcast for the next two days, and on 10 October, the weather was fair with scattered showers and periods of rain. The wind was westerly, between 10 and 20 mph. 563560 Flight Sergeant (F/Sgt) H. H. NETTLETON, R.A.F., met with a fatal accident when his aircraft, Beaufort L.9858, crashed near the village of Fremington about four miles south of Chivenor aerodrome. He was undertaking a solo night flying exercise when he crashed.

R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 217 Squadron

In mid-1941, No. 217 Squadron was equipped with Bristol Beaufort Mk. I torpedo bombers based at R.A.F. St. Eval in Cornwall. The squadron had flown many sorties against land and sea targets, in particular in and around Brest, armed with mines, bombs, and occasionally torpedoes. In September 1941, the squadron commenced converting to Bristol Beaufort Mk. IIs.¹⁴ On 9 September, No. 217 Squadron received an order from H.Q.C.C. to send one Beaufort to R.A.F. Detling for the prototype fitting of Special Equipment. The term Special Equipment was the name given to the A.S.V. radar fitted to Coastal Command aircraft, and the type to be fitted to No. 217 Squadron aircraft was the Mk. II version. The signal also requested that two Wireless Operator Mechanics (WOMs) be sent to Detling as well, which the squadron could not comply with as it had no WOMs on strength, and only two Wireless Electrical Mechanics. F/O TAYLOR and his crew left R.A.F. St. Eval for R.A.F. Detling later that day.¹⁵

Later on 9 September, a further signal arrived at R.A.F. St. Eval ordering the squadron to send two further Beauforts to R.A.F. Chivenor for a period of three months on special operations. Two days later, two additional Beauforts left for R.A.F. Chivenor, one flown by F/L HALLEY and the other flown by F/Sgt STEWART.¹⁶ Twenty electricians transferred to R.A.F. Chivenor to join the detachment, leaving a shortage of electricians back at R.A.F. St. Eval. On 12 September, 22160 W/C J. CONSTABLE-ROBERTS General Duties, and 74243 S/L C. VOLK, of the Administrative and Special Duties Branch, arrived on posting to R.A.F. Chivenor from Headquarters, No. 16 Group.¹⁷

On 26 September, Sgt MacGREGOR and P/O ETHERIDGE moved to R.A.F. Chivenor to join the detached flight. H.Q.C.C. informed No. 217 Squadron that this detachment was on secret duties, under the command of 22160 W/C J. CONSTABLE-ROBERTS, and no information was to be recorded in the squadron's Operations Record Book about their duties. The visits continued, with S/L SIMMONS calling in on his way to R.A.F. Abingdon, with P/O WARTON returning by the same route. On 5 October, Sgt MORGAN returned from R.A.F. Chivenor, and the next day, F/O TAYLOR (the squadron signals leader) visited the detachment. On 7 October, it was the turn of the Commanding Officer, W/C BOWER, to visit the detachment at R.A.F. Chivenor and speak with W/C CONSTABLE-ROBERTS.¹⁸ W/C CONSTABLE-ROBERTS ended his attachment to R.A.F. Chivenor on 10 October, but W/C BOWER returned to R.A.F. Chivenor on 13 October. He visited again on 24 October, prior to the detachment moving to R.A.F. Manston to test the A.S.V. off the Dutch coast.¹⁹

¹⁴ NESBIT, Roy Conyers *An Expendable Squadron – The Story of 217 Squadron Coastal Command 1939 – 1945* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Aviation, 2014)

¹⁵ AIR 28/152

¹⁶ The attachment of F/L HALLEY to R.A.F. Chivenor from No. 217 Squadron is mentioned in the O.R.B. for R.A.F. Chivenor, but the reason for the attachment is not. See: Air 28/152.

¹⁷ AIR 28/152

¹⁸ AIR 27 1341/17, 1341/19 and 1341/20.

¹⁹ NESBIT, Roy Conyers *An Expendable Squadron – The Story of 217 Squadron Coastal Command 1939 – 1945* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Aviation, 2014) p.153

No. 217 Squadron was warned to move to R.A.F. Thorney Island in Hampshire from R.A.F. St. Eval in Cornwall in October: the main detachment moving on 28 October 1941. During the period of this attachment to R.A.F. Chivenor, a crash occurred of a Beaufort that some sources state was allocated to No. 217 Squadron, although other sources contradict this. That the aircraft was operating from R.A.F. Chivenor is not in doubt, but the circumstances of this incident illustrate the nature of war-time record keeping.

Circumstances of the Crash

Bristol Beaufort, registration serial L.9808, was one of two-hundred and twenty-one Mark I aircraft delivered to the R.A.F. by the Bristol Aeroplane Company between March and August 1940. It was delivered new to No. 5 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit at R.A.F. Chivenor in North Devon, as that unit assumed responsibility for training Beaufort crews.²⁰

On Friday, 10 October 1941, the weather was fair, with scattered showers and periods of rain. The wind was from the west to south-west, strength of ten to twenty miles per hour. F/Sgt H. H. NETTLETON took off from R.A.F. Chivenor at 21.30 hours, in Bristol Beaufort Mk. I, L.9808, to undertake some local solo night flying. Shortly after take-off, the aircraft flew into high ground described as four miles south-west of Barnstaple, or four miles south of Chivenor. Local enquires suggest that the aircraft crashed at Knightacott Farm, just to the south of the village of Fremington, near Barnstaple. The pilot died in the crash, there was no fire.

The pilot was the sole air crew on board at the time of the crash.²¹ He was:

563560	F/Sgt H. H. NETTLETON, R.A.F.	Pilot
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The body of F/Sgt NETTLETON was recovered from the scene of the crash and taken to Tavistock, his hometown in Devon for burial in the town's cemetery.²²

Court of Inquiry

R.A.F. Chivenor convened a Court of Enquiry, which determined that F/Sgt NETTLETON flew into high ground whilst endeavouring to keep below cloud. A sudden squall occurred shortly after take-off, which contributed to the loss of control when instrument flying.²³

²⁰ HAYWARD, Roger *The Beaufort File* (Tonbridge, Air Britain (Historians) Ltd, 1990) p.36. It seems unlikely that this aircraft served only with No. 5 (C) O.T.U., as all this batch were delivered by August 1940, and No. 5 (C) O.T.U. was not formed until August 1941. The two most likely options are that it was allocated from new to No. 217 Squadron, as was L.9807 was, or to No. 3 (C) O.T.U..

²¹ *R.A.F. Chivenor Operational Record Book TNA AIR 28/152*

²² See: <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx>

²³ The word 'sudden' is underlined on the Form 1180.

The absence of a local metrological unit was noted, with the Court of enquiry considering one was essential at R.A.F. Chivenor. In addition, they recommended that a wireless operator be carried and R.T.T. control established for all night flights.²⁴

Accidents Investigation Branch

The Accidents Investigation Branch of the Air Ministry may have investigated this accident, but it appears that any accident report has not survived.

The Air Crew

563560 Flight Sergeant Herbert Henry NETTLETON, R.A.F.

Herbert Henry NETTLETON, who was known to his family as 'Nick', was a pre-war member of the Royal Air Force. He was born on 6 December 1913, at 17, Bowling Green Terrace, in Worcester. He was the eldest son of Ernest Edward NETTLETON, and his wife Phoebe Myra NETTLETON (nee OLIVER). Ernest NETTLETON originated from the West Riding of Yorkshire, having been born in Weatherby. Ernest's father was a gardener, and he moved his family to Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, and by 1901, they had moved again to Bromyard in Herefordshire. He worked as a draper's assistant in Bromyard, but by 1911, he had gained employment with the Great Western Railway in the Telegraph Department. Ernest and Phoebe married in Worcester during the second quarter of 1912. Her father was the Verger for St. Paul's Church in Worcester, which is presumably where the couple married.

Ernest began his railway service as a Railway Telegraph Storekeeper on the Great Western Railway, but later became a Linesman, installing and repairing the telegraph lines that provided communication across the railway system. Nick was the only child born in Worcester, as in 1913, the family moved to Devizes in Wiltshire, where twin sisters Dorothy Ellen and Phoebe Vera were born on 29 July 1917. Edwin Lionel followed on 14 January 1921 to complete the family in Devizes. In 1923, Ernest and his family moved to Plymouth, and in 1935, they moved to Tavistock. The family set up home in 'The Bungalow' in College Avenue in the town. Nick first went to school in Devizes and was a choirboy at St. Mary's Church in the town. When he was aged nine years, the family moved to Plymouth and went to live in Turret Grove, Mutley, Plymouth. Nick attended the Hyde Park School, and later the Durnford Street Technical School until leaving at the age of fifteen years.

Nick NETTLETON enlisted in the Royal Air Force with effect from 27 August 1929, at the age of fifteen years, and commenced his apprentice training at R.A.F. Halton. He was 5' 6" tall, with brown hair, blue eyes and a fresh complexion. He completed his training as an electrician on 6 December 1931, and on 31 December 1932, he was promoted to the rank Aircraftsman Class 1. He was promoted to Leading Aircraftsman on 31 December 1935.

²⁴ Form 1180 Beaufort L.9808

In April 1936, NETTLETON was serving with No. 70 (Bomber) Squadron, which was based at R.A.F. Hinadi in Iraq, but by July 1937, he had returned to the U.K. in order to train as a pilot. On 17 July, LAC NETTLETON was posted to No. 5 Flying Training School at R.A.F. Sealand in Cheshire. He qualified as a pilot, gaining his 'wings' on 19 February 1938. On the same date, he was posted to R.A.F. Gosport for training in torpedo bombing using Swordfish aircraft. On 13 June 1938, he joined No. 42 (Torpedo Bomber) Squadron, which flew Vickers Vildebeest and was based at R.A.F. Thorney Island in Hampshire. This squadron had been formed a couple of years previously from a detachment from No. 22 Squadron.

Promotion came to NETTLETON on 31 December 1938, with his advancement to the rank of Sergeant.²⁵ Together with Sgt BAKER, Sgt NETTLETON was due to be attached to R.A.F. Bircham Newton in Norfolk for a conversion course to twin-engine aircraft. They left on 31 July 1939, but they were recalled the same day due to the imminent outbreak of war, and the decision to transfer the Squadron to a new base. With effect from 18 August 1939, the squadron moved to R.A.F. Bircham Newton, to cover the southern North Sea, including the German coastline. At the outbreak of the Second World War, the squadron commenced flying patrols over the sea in their obsolete, biplane aircraft. While the Squadron was based at R.A.F. Thorney Island, Nick NETTLETON had met Olive Frances, who was a children's nurse, and the daughter of a retired Master at Arms of the Royal Navy. Her home address was 10, Westbrook Grove, Purbrook, Hampshire, and they married at a Methodist church in Portsmouth in the fourth quarter of 1939. In January 1940, No. 42 Squadron began converting to the Bristol Beaufort monoplane torpedo bomber, but Sgt NETTLETON was posted to No. 22 Squadron, based at R.A.F. Thorney Island in Hampshire, with effect from 25 January 1940, bringing him closer to his wife's home in Purbrook.

On 1 March 1940, Nick NETTLETON was promoted to the rank of Temporary Flight Sergeant, while based at Thorney Island. The next important event in his life was the birth of his first son on 2 September 1940, who was christened Nicholas Edward. At this period, Coastal Command was re-equipping its torpedo bombing squadrons, Nos. 22, 48, 86 and 217, with Bristol Beaufort aircraft. These four squadrons were to become the main strike squadrons against German shipping until 1942, when Beaufighters and Mosquitos replaced them. In addition, there were some squadrons equipping with the Lockheed Hudson, which were used for anti-shipping strikes, as well as their role as convoy escorts and maritime patrolling.

The unexpected fall of France in June 1940 changed the nature of the Second World War entirely. Now the German Navy had easier and quicker access to the Atlantic Ocean with bases on the French coast, Brest being the main port. Italy declared war on the U.K., making the Mediterranean a new theatre of war. To address the threat posed by the German Navy operating out of French ports on their west coast, No. 217 Squadron was posted to R.A.F. St. Eval in Cornwall.

²⁵ Usually, as a qualified pilot, NETTLETON would have been promoted to the rank of Temporary Sergeant on the same date as he received his Flying Brevet, or 'Wings'. It is not known whether this occurred in his case. This date, therefore, may be the date of his substantive promotion to the rank of Sergeant.

NETTLETON was an experienced pilot, albeit he was qualified to fly obsolete types including the Fairey Swordfish, Hawker Hart, Hawker Audax, and Vickers Vildebeest. It was necessary for him to convert to a modern type of aircraft, and the Beaufort was the obvious choice because of his service with Coastal Command torpedo bombers. In preparation for this, he was posted to No. 3 School of General Reconnaissance at R.A.F. Squires Gate, Blackpool, with effect from 1 December 1940. This school held 'captain's' courses, training pilots on their responsibilities as a captain of the aircraft, and over-sea navigation skills.²⁶ The school used Blackburn Botha twin-engine aircraft.

On the successful completion of his course, during which time he was promoted to the substantive rank of Flight Sergeant (with effect from 31 December 1940), the now F/Sgt NETTLETON remained at Squires Gate, presumably as an instructor, for another seven months. Eventually, he was posted to No. 217 Squadron in Cornwall with effect from 26 August 1941. The issue for F/Sgt NETTLETON was that he had few (if any) hours on the Beaufort, so required a conversion course prior to assuming operational duties at R.A.F. St. Eval. As R.A.F. Chivenor was the home of No. 5 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit, which was predominantly a Beaufort equipped unit, and the sole training base for this type in Coastal Command, it was logical that F/Sgt NETTLETON was attached to No. 5 (C) O.T.U. for a conversion course, and to get his Beaufort hours up before joining his squadron. At the time, No. 217 Squadron had a detachment based at R.A.F. Chivenor testing and training with the new Air to Surface Vessel radar. As a member of that squadron, it is presumed that F/Sgt NETTLETON met up with his colleagues from R.A.F. St. Eval.

F/Sgt NETTLETON was still undergoing his conversion course when he died on 10 October 1941. He had flown for nine days short of four years before his death. Although he had flown five-hundred and sixty-nine hours on other types of aircraft, NETTLETON had flown only fifty-nine hours on Beauforts; eleven of which were under dual instruction. In the past six months, he had flown two-hundred and fifty-seven hours on other types, and the fifty-nine hours on Beauforts.²⁷ He had flown only one hour in a Beaufort in night flying training, leading to the conclusion that he was possibly flying at night, solo, for the first time in a Beaufort, while converting to this type of aircraft.

There is some confusion about which unit F/Sgt NETTLETON was serving with at the time of his death.²⁸ The Form 1180 and R.A.F. Davidstow Moor crash log state that the aircraft belonged to No. 217 Squadron at R.A.F. St. Eval.²⁹ The loss is recorded in the Operations Record Book for R.A.F. Chivenor, which covered the operations of No. 5 (C) O.T.U., and the aircraft was allocated in official records to No. 5 (C) O.T.U..³⁰

²⁶ By this date, in the R.A.F., the pilot was the captain of the aircraft, irrespective of his rank, whereas previously (and it remained so in the Polish Air Force during the war), the most senior aircrew in rank.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The Graves Registration Document shows NETTLETON as serving with No. 5 (C) O.T.U..

See: <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2811972/NETTLETON,%20HERBERT%20HENRY>

²⁹ See: <http://www.rafdavidstowmoor.org/crash-log/view-1941-crash-log/> On the Form 1180, it lists the unit that the aircraft belonged to as No. 5 O.T.U., which is crossed out and replaced by 217 Sqn.

³⁰ See: HAYWARD, Roger *The Beaufort File* (Tonbridge, Air Britain (Historians) Ltd, 1990) [ISBN 0 85130 171 1]

Group Captain CRACROFT, the commanding officer of R.A.F. Chivenor, sent a letter of condolence to Mrs Olive NETTLETON, stating that her husband died instantly. In addition, Wing Commander L. W. C. BOWER, the commanding officer of No. 217 Squadron wrote to Mrs. Olive NETTLETON. He conveyed his sadness about the death of F/Sgt NETTLETON. He confirmed how he had arrived with the squadron in August, but shortly afterwards was posted to R.A.F. Chivenor to receive training on the Beaufort, which the squadron operated. W/C BOWER confessed that he knew little of him because they were awaiting his return to the squadron, where he would be crewed up. W/C BOWER concluded his letter by stating: *'The loss of your husband is a distinct blow to the service particularly such a pilot of considerable experience'*.

As was usual in the death of a member of the Royal Air Force in the United Kingdom, the R.A.F. discussed with the family about the funeral arrangements. R.A.F. Chivenor sent a telegram to Mrs Olive NETTLETON outlining the procedure under these circumstances. If she decided to have her husband buried at Chivenor, with full military honours, the cost would be borne by public funds. Mrs NETTLETON would be allowed a return railway warrant (issued at the local police station) for two persons to travel to Chivenor if she wished to attend the funeral and could not afford the train fare. If she desired a private funeral, a maximum of £7-10-0 would be allowed, to include the cost of the coffin. The cost of conveying the coffin (usually by rail) to the home was allowed as well.

His parents wished for him to be buried in Tavistock, as the family lived at The Bungalow, College Avenue, Tavistock. The Great Western Railway employed his father, who worked at Tavistock South station. A funeral service took place on Tuesday 14 October 1941, at Tavistock Parish Church, conducted by Prebendary H. L. BICKERSTETH. Mr. W. H. E. VERRAN, the Wesley Church organist, played the organ at the service. The coffin was borne by Flight Sergeants and Sergeants of the R.A.F., with the coffin draped in the Union Flag. The chief mourners were Nick's parents, his sisters Mrs. V. OLDEN and Miss D. NETTLETON, his sister-in-law Mrs. E. L. NETTLETON, and Mrs. A. T. PENGELLY. For an unknown reason, his widow Mrs Olive Frances NETTLETON and his son were unable to attend. The Great Western Railway were represented by the Stationmaster, Mr. W. MARTIN, and Mr. W. HODGE and Mr. T. SWALE. Fifteen other mourners attended, with the funeral organised by Messrs MORRIS Bros of Tavistock. Following the service, the funeral directors took the body for burial in Sec. F.f. Grave 121 of the Tavistock New Cemetery, in Devon.

Posthumously, F/Sgt H. H. NETTLETON received promotion to the rank of Warrant Officer, which was dated the day of his death, 10 October 1941, but back-dated to 1 April 1941. This promotion would have enhanced his pension to his widow, Olive NETTLETON of Purbrook, Hampshire. W/O H. H. NETTLETON is commemorated on the war memorials at Tavistock in Devon, and Purbrook.³¹ Purbrook is a village between Cosham and Waterlooville in Hampshire and is part of the Borough of Havant. The Air Ministry awarded Warrant Officer NETTLETON posthumously, the 1939 – 45 Star, the Atlantic Star, and the 1939 – 1945 War Medal.³²

³¹ See: <http://www.devonheritage.org/Places/Tavistock1/Tavistockthe1939-1945WarMemorial.htm>

³² DUCKERS, Peter *British Campaign Medals 1914 – 2000* (Princes Risborough, Shire Publications Ltd., 2011)

Nick's father, Ernest Edward NETTLETON, retired from the G.W.R. in November 1949, after thirty-eight years' service, the last fifteen of which were at Tavistock. There is a sad sequel to this, as on 24 April 1950, Ernest committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a train, dying instantly, aged sixty-seven years. He had dreaded retirement from the railway and had become increasingly concerned about the health of his wife, Phoebe. He saw his doctor about his depression, but it deepened, and Ernest began talking about ending his life. On that fateful day, he walked from Tavistock South station to Mount Tavy bridge, and crouched down behind a bush. As the afternoon passenger train from Launceston approached, he raised himself and threw himself in front of it. He is buried either in the same grave or alongside his son, although Ernest's grave is not marked. Phoebe died in 1966 and is also buried in the same grave.

Conclusions

This incident and the loss of F/Sgt NETTLETON illustrate the confusion that can arise when researching events of the Second World War. The accuracy and details of record keeping during this period was variable and relied on the diligence of the men and women filling in the various forms. Most were handwritten, but some were typed, with errors and mistakes creeping into the system on some occasions.

The death of F/Sgt NETTLETON brings to light the lack of metrological information available at this stage of the Second World War to all personnel involved with the flying duties. Local variations in weather conditions could change the risk factors involving a flight significantly, as appears to be the situation in this crash. It would appear that a sudden, and unforeseen, squall affected the flight of L.9808 shortly after take-off, and while attempting to retain visual contact of his position by flying under the cloud, F/Sgt NETTLETON flew into rising ground to the south of the River Taw. Local enquiries in the Fremington area suggest that at about the time of this crash, an aircraft hit the top of an unoccupied property to the south of Fremington called Gullincott. It is reported that an aircraft hit the chimney and roof of the property before crashing a short time afterwards. It is not possible to confirm that this aircraft was L.9808, but the circumstances appear to apply to the loss of this aircraft. Gullincott is now a ruin but lies in the valley a short distance below the crash site, which would confirm the track up the valley believed to have been taken by L.9808, although this will always remain supposition.

The context at the time of the crash that the flight did not carry a wireless operator, and radio-telegraphy (R/T) control was not in place for night-time flights, meant that F/Sgt NETTLETON could not be warned of the presence of the squall, nor could he be recalled to base. Once he was airborne, he was alone and reliant on his own experience, and a degree of luck. All these circumstances meant that flying at night during the Second World War, whether on operations or training, carried with it a significant risk of the loss of the aircraft, and aircrew

The technical aids taken for granted by pilots today either, had not been invented by 1941, or like radar, were in their rudimentary forms, and not the sophisticated systems they are today. There was little alternative to gaining experience of night flying other than by doing it, and sadly it claimed the life of Nick NETTLETON on this occasion, and many other air crew during the war.

On the date of the crash, there was not a meteorological station at R.A.F. Chivenor, which had to rely on weather information from No. 19 Group at Plymouth.³³ There was a weather station at Hartland Point, and the synoptic situation at 07.00 on 10 October 1941 shows low pressure in the north-west approaches, feeding a relatively stable westerly flow over North Devon.³⁴ By 07.00 on 11 October 1941, the synoptic picture shows the low pressure over Germany, and an unstable north-west flow over the area with an occluded frontal system aligned from Great Yarmouth – London – Lyme Regis – Padstow, moving south-south-east at approximately 20 knots. This means it passed over R.A.F. Chivenor about two to three hours before the crash of L.9808.

The observations at Hartland Point at 18.00 hours on 10 October gave a westerly wind, Force 3, with good visibility and a cloud base of about 1,200 feet with 9/10 cloud cover. By 01.00 hours the next morning, the wind speed had increased to Force 5, and the total cloud was now 10/10, but the base had risen to 1,500 feet. Hartland point recorded some rain showers and noted that visibility reduced in these showers. It appears that F/Sgt NETTLETON took off into an area of showers in a slightly unstable airmass ahead of the front. Having climbed to the west off Runway 28, and presumably flying on instruments in the dark, F/Sgt NETTLETON will have turned through 180° to join the circuit at R.A.F. Chivenor, and fly up the River Taw, before turning again to land back on the main runway at the base. It is likely that he entered some shower cloud and moderate rain, and in trying to get below it to regain some visual markers, he drifted off course near Fremington and flew into a shallow valley and then into the rising ground to the south of the River Taw.

Even with modern computers, radar and other flying aids, accidents still occur through loss of situational awareness in circumstances of bad weather. Examples of this include the crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 309 in 1996, and the loss of Nepal Airlines Flight RA183 in 2014. This phenomenon is also known as Controlled Flight into Terrain (C.F.I.T.), this term coming into use in the late 1970's as more in-depth analysis of aircraft accidents developed. Back in October 1941, with limited training, rudimentary flight simulators, no radio altimeters, no ground proximity radars, pilots flying solo had high workloads in the cockpit, and it was sadly inevitable that in poor weather conditions, this type of accident was common. It is no reflection on the ability of F/Sgt NETTLETON as a pilot, fate decreed that he was simply unlucky on that occasion.

³³ R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 5 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit were part of No. 17 Group, which comprised all the training bases in Coastal Command, but No. 19 Group was the regional R.A.F. command for South-West England and South Wales, so it provided the meteorological information to R.A.F. Chivenor.

³⁴ See Page 31 for the weather charts.

In Memoriam

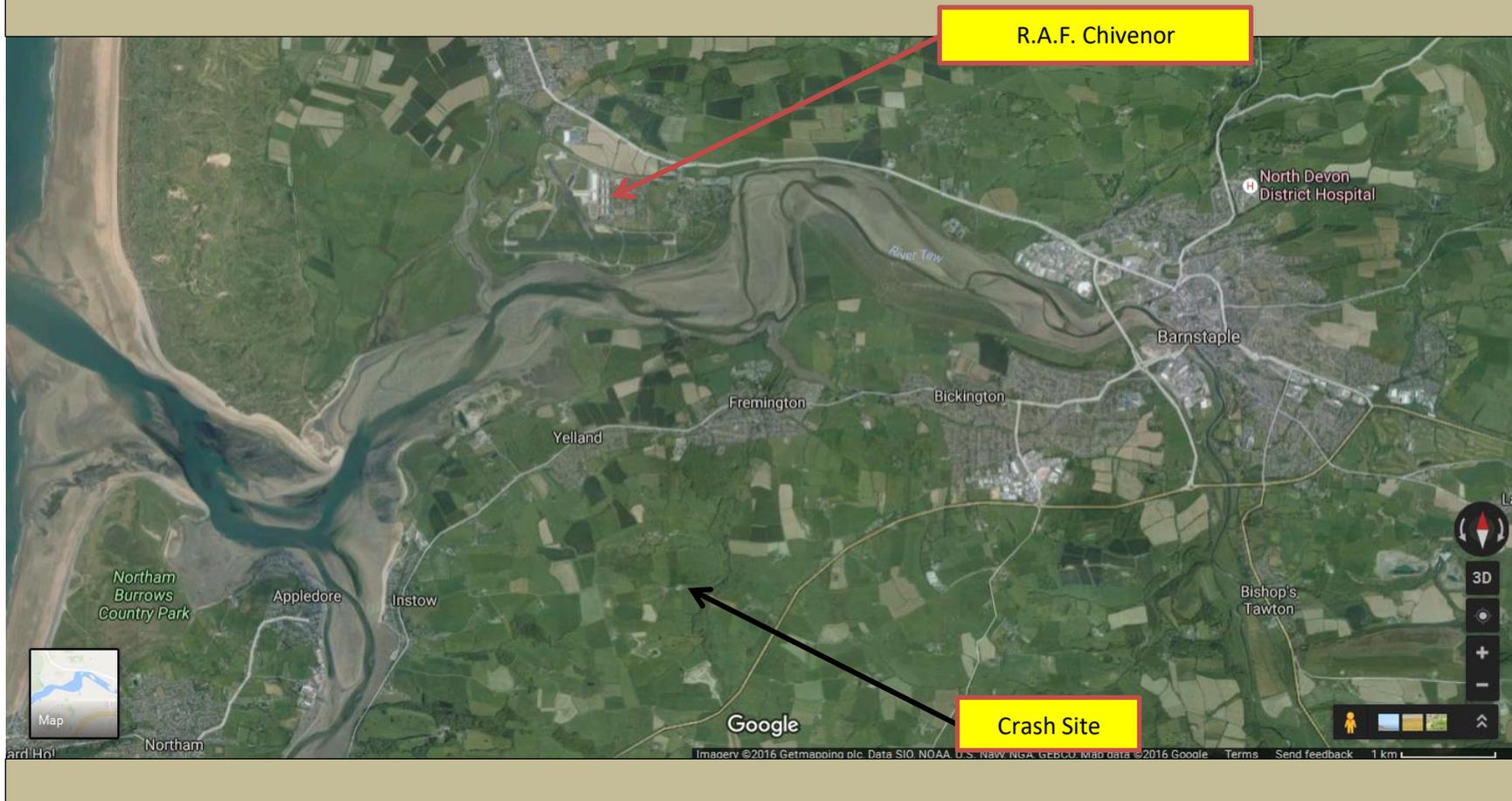
10 October 1941 – Bristol Beaufort Mk. I – L.9808

No.	Surname	Forenames(s)	Age	Date of Death	Rank	Role	Service	Service Number	Place of Burial	Grave
1.	NETTLETON ³⁵	Herbert Henry	28	10/10/41	Warrant Officer	Pilot	R.A.F.	563560	Tavistock New Cemetery	Sec. F.f. Grave 121.

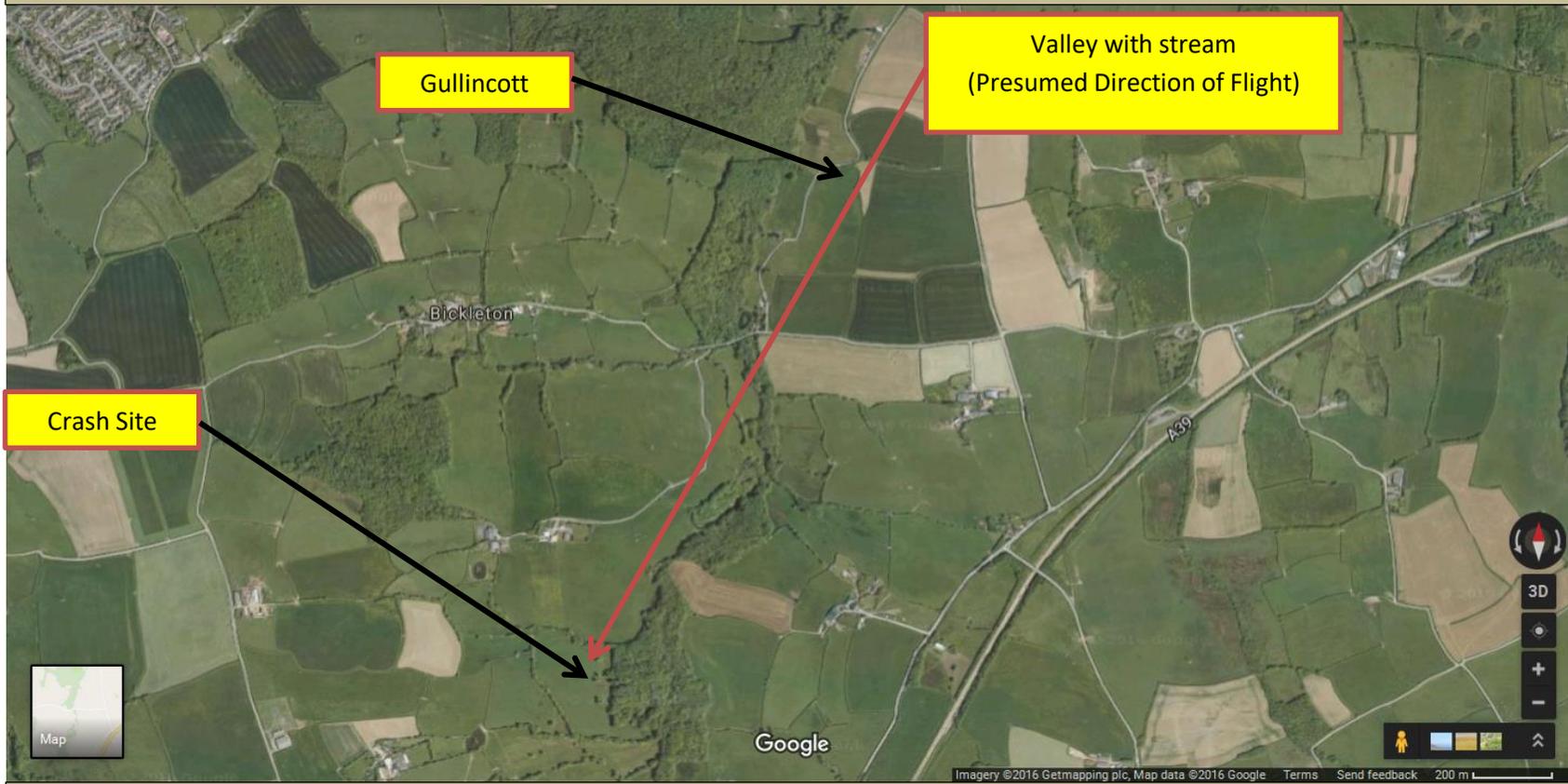
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2811972/NETTLETON,%20HERBERT%20HENRY>

³⁵ Son of Ernest Edwin and Phoebe Myra NETTLETON; husband of Olive Frances NETTLETON, of Purbrook, Hampshire.

Map of the area to the south of R.A.F. Chivenor



Map of the crash site of L.9808 – 10 October 1941





*Left – Sgt NETTLTON displaying his Sergeant’s stripes and Pilot’s Badge (‘Wings’)
Above – The Medals awarded to Sgt NETTLETON.*

Courtesy of: Nick NETTLETON (son)



Left – A photograph including LAC NETTLETON, taken at Hinadi airfield in Iraq circa 1936/37.

Right – A photograph of Nick NETTLETON, taken in Iraq, presumably at Christmas time.

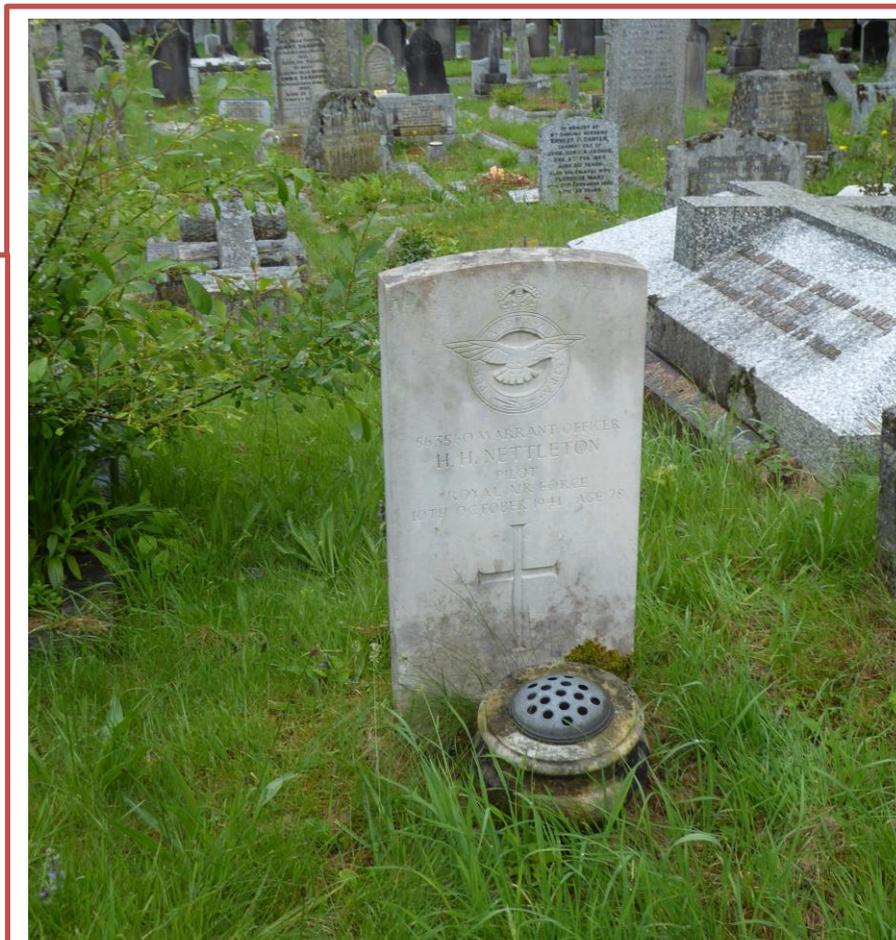
Courtesy of Nick NETTLETON (son)



Left – A photograph of Sgt NETTLETON with other personnel, probably of No. 42 Squadron. The aircraft behind the men is a Vickers Vildebeest.

Right – Nick and Olive NETTLETON on their wedding day.

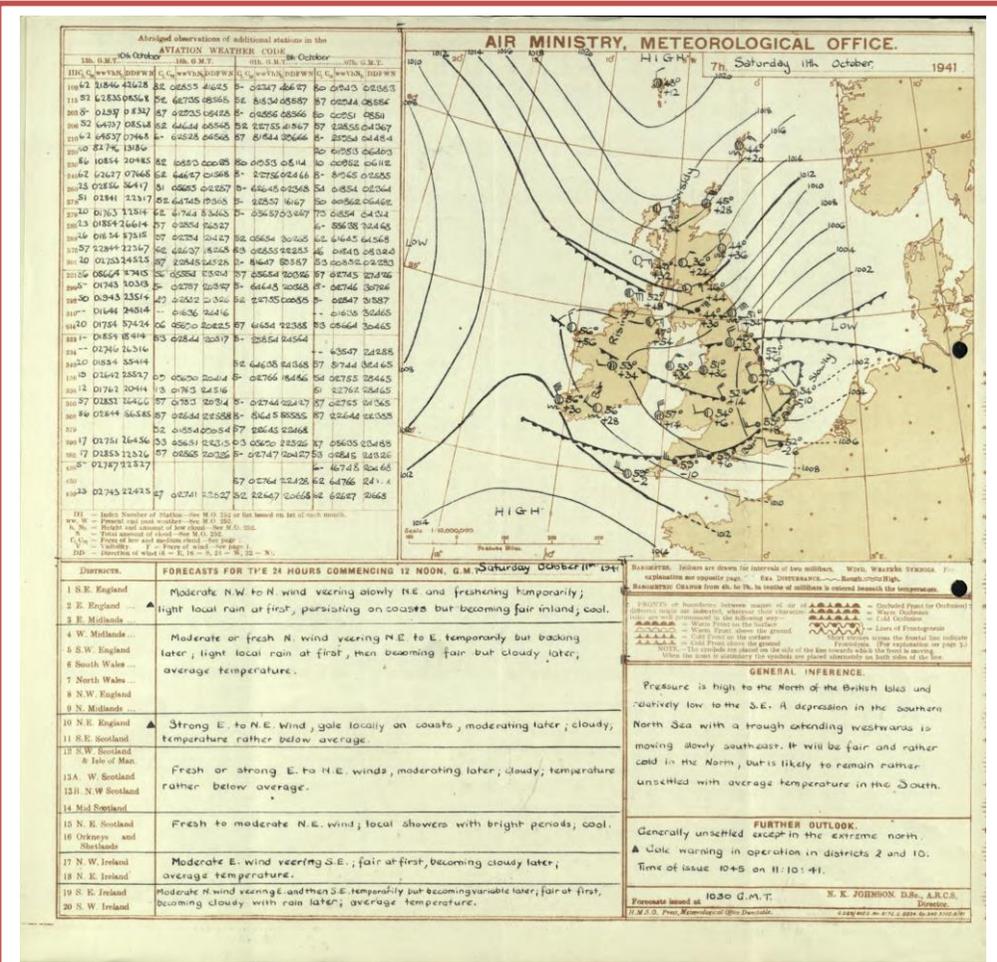
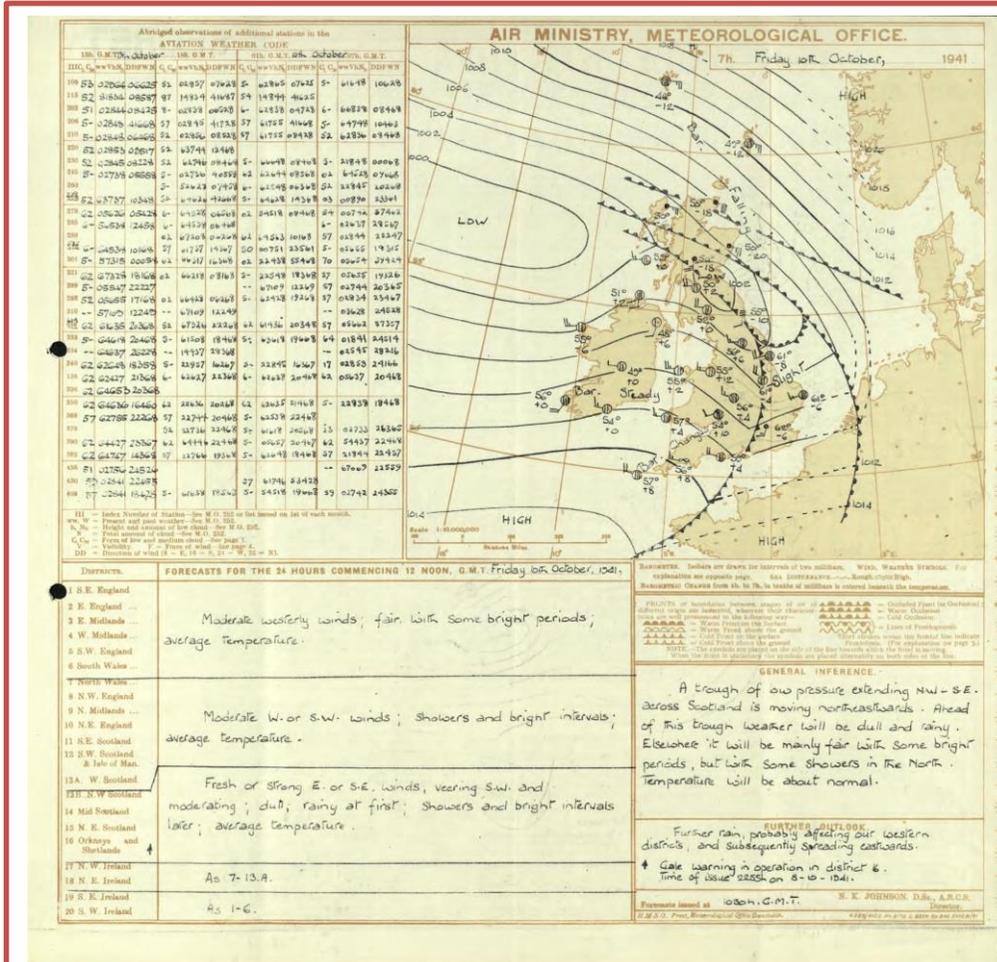
Courtesy of Nick NETTLETON (son)



Left – The crash site at Knightacott, near Fremington. The actual location is believed to be in the field, behind the large tree, in the centre of the picture.

Right – The grave of W/O H. H. NETTLETON in Tavistock Cemetery.

Taken by the Author (2018)



Above Left and Right – The weather charts for Friday 10 October and Saturday 11 October 1941.

Courtesy of: David HOWELLS

PCN
WVG
A.M. Form 1180 ✓

12 CG ABOK TSFI EOK UOK ARM XCM

217 sq

D	M	Y	Unit	Group	Command
10	10	41	507.4 ^{op}	5	C

Signal No	A 318	A : B : C	2/30	Duty	Fire in air or impact	No
7656 554	N.S.D. 14/10	A		DARK NIGHT Local flying	Parachute	Fitted Used
A.I.B	✓	K	I	Aircraft	W:R:M	Flotation Gear
C of I	Yes A.312626/41	✓	-	BEAUFORT I L9808	W	Fitted Worked
Aerodrome	Home: Foreign: Not on	Engine	153096	W	Lives saved	
Place	about 4 mls S.W. of Barnstaple North Devon	TAURUS II	130875	W	A/c salvaged	

Sudden change of weather

Planes into high ground, whilst endeavouring to keep below cloud. A sudden squall occurred shortly after he had taken off. Suggest local Met. unit is essential (C.O.)
CofP: - loss of control when instrument flying

Cause	F.4
	G.O.

Above and Next Page – the R.A.F. Form 1180 – Aircraft Accident Card

Courtesy of: The Air Historical Branch

Pilot's Name		TOTAL HOURS FLOWN			
NETTLETON		Dual before Solo on Training Type		Dual before Solo on Service Type	
Rank	563560	Nature of Commission			
Date of Wings		TYPE			
19	10	37	SOLO	DUAL	TOTAL
Date of Birth		Accident Type	48	11	59
Period since Wings		Others	59		
Years	Months	Trained at	512	57	569
4		B.F.T.S.	580		
Age when Qualifying		Age at date of accident	Total		
			560	68	628
<p>Rec: - Competent met. Officer at home at unit & radio ops. advised & B.T.T. signal established on all night ops.</p> <p>A.O.C.: - T.R.A. are being installed for radio com.</p> <p>A.I.T.O. - not office opened at</p> <p>Chicago in New Year</p> <p>(1813) Wt. 32540 20m (5) 12740 Op. 607 C&S Ltd</p>		Instruments	During last six months	Night Flying Total	
		18	Type 48/11	Type	1
		Link Trainer	Others 257/1	Others	17
37	Total 305/12	Total	18		

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The Air Historical Branch *Form 1180 Aircraft Accident Card*

Additional Material provided by Mr. and Mrs. N. NETTLETON, son and daughter-in-law of W/O H. H. NETTLETON.

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Robert PALMER M.A.

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