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Bristol Blenheim Mk. IV R.3607
No. 13 Operational Training Unit, R.A.F. Bicester

THE LAST FLIGHT OF:

BLENHEIM V.6098

A narrative of the last flight of Blenheim V.6098, which crashed at 10.30 hours on Tuesday, 11 March 1941, at Trentishoe Down, North Devon, killing the pilot and two passengers. In addition, details of the lives of the air crew are included where known.

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The Last Flight of Blenheim V.6098

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Introduction

I expect it would be inconceivable to the men and women serving with the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) during the Second World War that, some eighty years later, people would be interested in their lives and what they wrote down at the time. One of the main sources of reference for researchers today are the Operations Record Books, Forms 540 and 541, that the R.A.F. required each unit to complete. The Form 540 was the 'Summary of Events', and the Form 541 was the 'Detail of Work Carried Out'. The latter would usually include details of all the operational sorties undertaken by that unit, including the air crew. R.A.F. stations, or bases, and non-operational units such as Operational Training Units (O.T.U.s.), were required to only complete a Form 540.

One of these issues for researchers reading these documents today is that the amount of information contained within these documents varies; some are expansive in the information provided and others are sparse and brief. In some cases, the information in different documents for the same day or incident is contradictory. This is the case with the loss of Bristol Blenheim Mk. IV, V.6098, which crashed at about 10.30 hours on Tuesday, 11 March 1941 at Trentishoe Down, North Devon.

The available Form 540 documents from R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 252 Squadron do not provide clarity on the circumstances of the crash, nor who was flying the aircraft at the time of the crash. The Casualty File from the Air Ministry does not add much to the known information, so there will always be a degree of uncertainty about the nature of the crash which claimed the lives of three pilots on that Tuesday morning. This is their story, as far as we know it to be.

No. 252 Squadron at R.A.F. Chivenor

The first operational squadron at R.A.F. Chivenor in North Devon was No. 252 Squadron, equipped with Beaufighters, and initially some Blenheims. It was in fact formed at R.A.F. Bircham Newton in Norfolk with effect from 21 November 1940, for fighter reconnaissance duties. It was to be formed to establishment WAR/CC/168, which allowed for a total of twenty-nine officers, two-hundred and fifty-seven other ranks; and the initial equipment was to be twenty Bristol Beaufighter Mk I aeroplanes, fitted with two Hercules X engines.

On 25 November, 37193 Flight Lieutenant (F/L) T. M. LOCKYER arrived at R.A.F. Chivenor on being posted from No. 206 Squadron for flying duties. He assumed command of 'A' Flight. On 29 November, 44619 Pilot Officer (P/O) R. W. HURST arrived at R.A.F. Bircham Newton from Headquarters, Maintenance Command, for duty as the Squadron Adjutant. On 1 December 1940, 33130 Squadron Leader (S/L) R. G. YAXLEY, M.C. also arrived at Chivenor from Headquarters Coastal Command with instructions to form this squadron at this base.¹ 33130 S/L Robert Gordon YAXLEY was a pre-war member of the R.A.F., who rose to become G/C R. G. YAXLEY, D.S.O., M.C., D.F.C..

¹ Some sources give the official date of formation of No. 252 Squadron as 21 November 1940, but these dates are taken from the R.A.F. Chivenor Operational Record Book AIR 27/152.

He was born in Bath, Somerset in 1912, the son of Robert and Agnes Elizabeth YAXLEY. He attended the Royal Air Force College and R.A.F. Cranwell, but had originally joined the R.A.F. under its Apprentice scheme, and was part of the 20th Entry at R.A.F. Halton. YAXLEY was granted a permanent commission in the rank of Pilot Officer with effect from 28 July 1934. P/O YAXLEY was posted to No. 2 Armoured Car Company, R.A.F., which was based in Palestine. While stationed there, he was promoted to the rank of Flying Officer with effect from 28 January 1936. On 6 November 1936, he was awarded the Military Cross with two other officers from the Company for: *'for gallant and distinguished services rendered in connection with the emergency operations in Palestine during the period 15 April to 14 September 1936'*. It was unusual for an officer of the Royal Air Force to be awarded the Military Cross.

At some date prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, F/O YAXLEY returned to the U.K., and was promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant on 28 January 1938. He was promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader on 1 January 1940, and assumed command of No. 252 Squadron on 1 December of that year. YAXLEY was promoted to the rank of Temporary Wing Commander on 1 September 1941. S/L YAXLEY led his squadron out to the Mediterranean, and on 17 October 1941, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. His citation stated:

This officer commanded a detachment of fighter aircraft which recently carried out a series of sorties with the object of assisting in the safe passage of our convoys in the Mediterranean. Attacks were made on certain aerodromes and seaplane bases which resulted in a loss to the enemy of at least 49 aircraft and a further 42 damaged. The Successes achieved undoubtedly contributed largely to the fact that the convoys were able to proceed without loss; only 1 ship was damaged but it succeeded in reaching port. The courageous leadership and determination of this officer is worthy of the highest praise, and throughout he set an example which proved an inspiration to his fellow pilots.

W/C YAXLEY transferred to the command of another Beaufighter unit in the Mediterranean, No. 272 Squadron, and during his period of command, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order on 12 December 1941. This citation reads:

Since the operations in the Western Desert commenced this officer has led his squadron with conspicuous success. Enemy aerodromes, as far west of the battle area as Benghazi, have been attacked daily and other serious damage has been inflicted on the enemy. On the opening day of the operations a number of Junkers 52 aircraft, carrying troops, were encountered and 7 of them were shot down. In addition to a daily toll of enemy aircraft destroyed, heavy casualties have been inflicted on ground crews while lines of communication have been harassed and petrol tankers set on fire. Altogether, within a space of 6 days operations, no less than 46 of the enemy's aircraft were destroyed. Much of the brilliant successes achieved can be attributed to the courageous leadership and determination displayed by Wing Commander Yaxley. Throughout, he has set a magnificent example.



On 8 July 1942, W/C YAXLEY (see left) assumed command of No. 117 Squadron, and it was while serving with that unit that he lost his life on 3 June 1943. He was flying a Lockheed Hudson over the Bay of Biscay when it was shot down by a Junkers 88. YAXLEY, who had just been promoted to the rank of Group Captain, and all the passengers died in the crash. He was aged thirty-one years, and is commemorated on Panel 118 of the Runnymede Memorial in Surrey. Son of Robert and Agnes Elizabeth YAXLEY, he was married to Patricia O'Callaghan YAXLEY of Brompton, Kent.

At 00.01 hours on 1 December 1940, No. 252 Squadron officially transferred from R.A.F. Bircham Newton to R.A.F. Chivenor. On 3 December, 43590 Flying Officer (F/O) W. H. KING arrived at R.A.F. Chivenor from R.A.F. Sumburgh for Engineer duties. F/LJ. M. LOCKYER, and P/O R. W. HURST arrived at R.A.F. Chivenor on 4 December, and were joined by Sub. Lieut. (A) K. HOLME, R.N., who arrived from No. 148 Squadron for flying duties with No. 252 Squadron.²

90011 F/L R. E. JAY and 91008 F/O J. G. LANE arrived from No. 500 Squadron on 8 December for flying duties, with F/L JAY assuming command of 'B' Flight. Two Fleet Air Arm aviators, Lieutenant (Air) R. E. GARDNER, R.N.V.R. and Sub. Lieut. (A) R. J. CORK, D.S.C, D.F.C., arrived from No. 242 Squadron, and 40906 F/O C. A. S. GREENHILL, D.F.C. arrived on being posted from No. 206 Squadron. A further arrival on 10 December was another F.A.A. pilot, Sub. Lieut. (A) R. D. B. HOPKINS, R.N., who was posted from No. 226 Squadron. In addition, on the same day, 76581 P/O P. S. HIRST arrived from No. 4 Bombing and Gunnery School for flying duties. 42700 P/O J. C. DAVIDSON arrived at R.A.F. Chivenor on 11 December from No. 8 Bombing and Gunnery School.

F/O 91008 John Graham LANE was destined to die while serving with No. 252 Squadron. He died on 16 April 1941, aged twenty-nine years, and is commemorated on Panel 30 of the Runnymede Memorial. Sub Lieutenant Richard John CORK rose to the rank of Lieutenant Commander (Air), but died on 14 April 1944, aged twenty-seven years, in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). At the time of his death, he was serving aboard H.M.S. Illustrious, and held the D.S.O. and D.F.C.. He is buried in Grave 2.C.9. of the Trincomalee War Cemetery, in Sri Lanka.

No. 252 Squadron was gaining pilots, but it still lacked aircraft. This was addressed on **15 December** when two Blenheim Mk. I aircraft, L.1279 and L.6792 were collected from R.A.F. Bircham Newton, both aircraft having been released from No. 235 Squadron. The aircraft were allocated for general twin-engine type training, as some pilots had little or no experience on modern twin-engine aircraft, and it was not possible to provide dual control on the Beaufighter.

² It appears these four men survived the Second World War.

On **16 December**, a batch of R.A.F. non-commissioned officers arrived from No. 210 Squadron for Air Crew duties as Observers/Wireless Operators. They were:

- 91949 F/Sgt G. BROWNE,
- 508751 F/Sgt J. TRANTER,
- 506311 Sgt S. CROSS,
- 522270 Sgt D. BOWIE,
- 523274 Sgt G. BALL,
- 550712 Sgt D. CUTTS.

P/O J. G. LINGARD arrived on **17 December** from No. 219 Squadron for flying duties, followed by P/O S. E. FRYER from No. 502 Squadron for Air Crew (Observer) duties on **21 December**. On that date, the Squadron suffered its first accident when F/O C. A. S. GREENHILL swung off the runway while taxiing Blenheim L.6792, resulting in the aircraft tipping on its nose and damage to both airscrews. A Form 765(C) was completed for this incident, which was in part, attributed to the soft conditions of the aerodrome at Chivenor off the runways. On **23 December**, two more Air Crew arrived for Observer/Wireless Operator duties from No. 502 Squadron. They were:

- 358520 F/Sgt G. DONALDSON,
- 524514 Sgt R. BUCKLEY.

As a Christmas present, the embryonic No. 252 Squadron received its first Beaufighter aircraft. The Mk. I version, R.2199 was collected from No. 19 Maintenance Unit on **26 December**. It was not equipped to Coastal Command standards, but was allocated for the training of the pilots on type, prior to the delivery of fully equipped Beaufighters. Another Beaufighter, R.2198, was collected from R.A.F. Bircham Newton on **27 December**. This aircraft was also unequipped, but was acquired for training purposes.

On **30 December**, three Blenheim Mk. IV aircraft were collected from No. 15 Maintenance Unit at R.A.F. Wroughton. These Blenheim were again allocated for the training of pilots on twin-engine aircraft. The aircraft were: L.6078, V.5741 and V.5738. Shortly after its arrival, V.5738 flown by F/O J. G. LANE, swung off the runway after landing, and turned on its nose in soft ground at the side of the runway. The aircraft was damaged beyond unit repair, and arrangements were made for the salvage organisation to collect the damaged aircraft for repair by contractors. The next day, an entry in the Form 540 Operations Record Book states:

During the recent wet weather, the aerodrome surface has been such that any aircraft not keeping to the runways was either bogged to a depth of a foot or more, or overturned, depending on the speed at which it was moving. Both accidents in the Squadron during December 1940 would not have occurred, had the aerodrome surface been reasonably firm. In general, during the first month of the Squadron's inception, training progress has been restricted, both through lack of aircraft and serviceability. Lack of equipment has made it difficult to keep the few aircraft held serviceable.

Towards the end of the month, however, the position improved somewhat. More training aircraft were delivered and essential equipment commenced to arrive.

The New Year brought new optimism, with the collection of Blenheim Mk. I K.7087 from No. 10 Maintenance Unit, and Blenheim Mk. VI V.5791 from No. 15 Maintenance Unit. Both aircraft were allocated were allocated to twin-engine training, which had been held up by a lack of aircraft. The weather was good, and flying training was now progressing well.

2 January was an important date, with the first Coastal Command specification Beaufighter Mk. I.C aircraft being collected from No. 32 Maintenance Unit at R.A.F. St. Athan in Glamorgan, Wales. The weather was extremely cold on this date, but it was clear and there was no snow. The wireless telegraphy (W/T) training of the Observers was perceived as presenting difficulties in the near future, as all the sets in the Beaufighters were new to the Air Crew, and information about them was difficult to obtain. On **3 January**, it was reported that all the pilots in the Squadron had now flown the Blenheim aircraft solo.

On **6 January**, Lieutenant (A) F. E. GARDNER, R.N.V.R., and Sub-Lieutenant (A) R. J. CORK, R.N., were posted from No. 252 Squadron to R.N.A.S. Yeovilton in Somerset for Fleet Air Arm duties. The Admiralty advised the Squadron that two more Naval pilots, both from a Swordfish squadron, were being posted to the Squadron as replacements. The weather was still extremely cold, but as there was no snow, flying could continue.

It was reported on **8 January** that flying training was progressing well, with seven pilots having flown solo on the Beaufighter. It was accepted that more Beaufighter aircraft, not necessarily with full equipment, were required in order not to impede advanced training. On **9 January**, Sub-Lieutenant V. R. CRANE, R.N.V.R. and Sub-Lieutenant I. D. FRASER, R.N.V.R. arrived at R.A.F. Chivenor from R.N.A.S. Arbroath for flying duties. Both pilots only had previous experience on biplane Fairey Swordfish aircraft, and had no experience whatsoever on twin-engine monoplanes, equipped with flaps, variable pitch airscrews, or a retracting undercarriage. In addition, their flying experience amounted to only two-hundred hours each.

On **10 January**, the weather was good, and flying training was going well. Sub-Lieutenants CRANE and FRASER were taught to fly the Blenheim aircraft. S/L YAXLEY attended a Conference with the Officer Commanding the Coastal Command Tactical Development Unit (C.C.T.D.U.) at R.A.F. Carew Cheriton in Pembrokeshire. The item under discussion was the wireless equipment for the Coastal Command Beaufighters. P/O E. KNOWLES was then attached from the C.C.T.D.U. to carry out extensive W/T trials on the Beaufighter, with the intention of approving standard signals equipment for the aircraft.

The weather was bad on the morning of **11 January**, with low cloud and drizzle. This limited the activity to local flying only. There was some improvement in conditions in the afternoon, allowing the training of pilots on twin-engine aircraft.

Beaufighter Mk. I R.2152 was used to carry out preliminary work for the signals trials for the C.C.T.D.U., and the Squadron was now up to approximately half its authorised establishment. The **next day**, the weather was bad, being cold and with low cloud. In spite of the weather, two cross-country flights were undertaken. The signals trials continued with Beaufighter Mk. I R.2152.

The weather was cold on **13 January** with ground mist over the aerodrome and Taw estuary. This prevented any flying in the morning. In the afternoon, the weather improved to allow local flying and some Blenheim training was carried out. The signal trials continued with the Beaufighter. In general, training was restricted because several aircraft were unserviceable through a lack of spares. On **14 January**, there was thick fog on the morning, and the weather was damp. A slight frost after some rain during the night had made the surface conditions bad. Again, the weather improved in the afternoon. Two aircraft flew to R.A.F. Abbotsinch near Glasgow ferrying pilots of No. 3 (C) O.T.U. to collect some Beaufort aircraft. One aircraft then flew to the Bristol Aeroplane Co. Ltd. at Filton, Bristol, to collect spares, and the other flew to R.A.F. Carew Cheriton to ferry P/O E. KNOWLES back to the C.C.T.D.U. on completion of his attachment. The Beaufighter signals trials were postponed as the aircraft was unserviceable. The Form 540 records that the lack of transport allocated to the Squadron at R.A.F. Chivenor had been causing considerable difficulty in re-fuelling, transporting billeted personnel, and other routine tasks. It was hoped that a new establishment of vehicles would improve matters.

The two Blenheims were still at R.A.F. Abbotsinch on **15 January**, but they returned in the late afternoon. Beaufighter Mk. I R.2153 was collected from No. 235 Squadron at R.A.F. Bircham Newton. This aircraft was originally allocated to R.A.F. Bircham Newton in November 1940 for use by No. 252 Squadron, but as the allocation documentation did not specify '252' Squadron, it was given to No. 235 Squadron instead. It had taken two months to sort out this matter.

This squadron was designated to be the first unit in Coastal Command to be equipped with the Beaufighter, in anticipation of service overseas. The first Beaufighters arrived in December, but the embryonic squadron used Blenheims until April when it became fully operational. The first fifteen Beaufighters flew out to Gibraltar on 1 May 1941, with the rest of the squadron joining them on 15 June. The squadron was to spend the rest of the war in the Mediterranean.

Circumstances of the Crash

The first tragedy to befall No. 252 Squadron occurred on Tuesday, 11 March 1941, when F/O A. J. GRISENTHWAITE, F/O C. J. HITCH and Sgt T. DYKES were tasked with flying to R.A.F. St. Athan in South Wales to collect two new Bristol Beaufighter aircraft allocated to the squadron. R.A.F. St Athan was the home to No. 32 Maintenance Unit, R.A.F., which specialised in installing electronic equipment such as Air-to-Surface Vessel (A.S.V.) radar, Identification Friend or Foe (I.F.F.) and Airborne Interception (A.I.) radar into new aircraft.

When a Bristol Beaufigther was built, it would be flown from the place of manufacture to an R.A.F. Maintenance Unit to be configured and prepared for operational duty. Once ready, it would be released to the squadron, and would often be flown by a ferry pilot to its new base.

On this occasion, the decision was taken for three pilots from the squadron to fly to St. Athan and bring back two new Beaufigther aircraft to Chivenor. A Bristol Blenheim Mk. IV aircraft, serial number V.6098, belonging to No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit based at R.A.F. Chivenor, was made available to the three pilots.³ They took off shortly after 10.00 hours to fly across North Devon and the Bristol Channel to St. Athan. It appears that F/O GRISENTHWAITE was flying the aircraft with the other two pilots as passengers.⁴ They were:

37721	F/O A. J. GRISENTHWAITE, R.A.F.	Pilot
41181	F/O C. J. HITCH, R.A.F.	Pilot
741239	Sgt T. DYKES, R.A.F.V.R.	Pilot

At abouts 10.30 hours, V.6098 flew into high ground at Rhydda Bank, on Trentishoe Down, in North Devon. It is assumed that the aircraft was heading north-east towards St. Athan when it crashed into the side of a hill. The Operations Record Book (O.R.B.) for No. 252 Squadron records:

Weather clear in early morning but deteriorated later. Serviceability as yesterday. Cross-country and navigation exercises continued while weather permitted. Flying Officer A. J. GRISENTHWAITE killed in flying accident to Blenheim V.6098 of No. 3 (C) Operational Training Unit while ferrying pilots to collect aircraft from St. Athan.

The O.R.B. for R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit states:

F/O C. J. HITCH ~~Embryo Instructor~~ of 252 Squadron, together with Sgt T. DYKES and F/O A. GRISENTHWAITE had a fatal accident while flying a Blenheim No. 6098. This crash entirely destroyed the A/C

All three pilots on-board died in the crash.⁵ The recovery of the wreckage was entrusted to No. 67 Maintenance Unit at Taunton.

The bodies of all three airmen were recovered and brought to the Mortuary at R.A.F. Chivenor. A Committee of Adjustment was held at R.A.F. Chivenor on 12 March, with two members of No. 252 Squadron acting as adjudicators. F/O J LOWE was the President, and F/L R. W. HURST the other member of the Committee.

³ The aircraft is shown as being allocated to No. 3 (C) O.T.U. on the Form 1180 (Accident Loss Card). It was fitted with two Bristol Mercury engines, 194016 and 194017, suggesting both were the original engines installed on manufacture.

⁴ The Form 540 for R.A.F. Chivenor suggests that F/O HITCH was flying the aircraft and describes him as an embryo instructor, but the Air Ministry Form 1180 (Aircraft Loss Card) states that F/O GRISENTHWAITE was flying the aircraft.

⁵ R.A.F. Chivenor Operations Record Book TNA AIR 28/152

The bodies of all three men were repatriated to their home areas, at the request of their families for burial. F/O HITCH was taken to Eltham Churchyard in south London for burial, F/O GRIENTHWAITE was buried in Penrith Cemetery, and Sgt DYKES was buried in Rutherglen Cemetery in Lanarkshire, Scotland on 15 March 1941.

The aircraft was a Bristol Blenheim Mk IV, one of a batch of eight-hundred manufactured by Rootes Securities at Blyth Bridge, Staffordshire, and delivered to the Royal Air Force between October 1940 and May 1941.

Court of Enquiry

A Court of Enquiry was held into this air crash, and the summary of its findings were:

Flew into hill. Pilot apparently misjudged position and dived through cloud base thinking he was over the sea. Inaccurate nav (navigation). It is considered that this Unit should be provided with a Met Officer for accurate information regarding local conditions.

The Air Officer Commanding No. 17 Group wrote:

Met Stn (Meteorological Station) approved but will not be given priority – does not consider its absence contrib (contributed to this accident). Met forecast did not contain the words ‘above sea level’ after value of cloud height and fact that cloud base was likely to be lower over high ground was not clearly emphasised. Attention of staff being drawn to this.

The Inquiry found that F/O GRIENTHWAITE had flown a total of six-hundred and seventy-one hours on all types of aircraft, of which thirty-three were on Blenheim aircraft and all of those were within the last six months. He had only flown thirty-one hours at night, together with sixteen hours on instruments and ten hours in a Link Trainer. He was, however, an experienced pilot for this period of the Second World War, having held his ‘Wings’ for two years and five months, and having completed an operational tour in Coastal Command.

Accidents Investigation Branch

The Accidents Investigation Branch of the Air Ministry, based in Gloucester, did not investigate this accident as the Court of Enquiry was considered sufficient.

The Air Crew

37721 Flying Officer Alfred John GRIENTHWAITE, R.A.F.

F/O Alfred John GRIENTHWAITE (who known as John) was the younger son of Alfred and Kathleen GRIENTHWAITE of Penrith, Westmorland, and was born on 23 March 1920 in Penrith. His grandfather, William, was a building contractor in Penrith, and his father followed in the family business. John was educated at the Penrith Grammar School, from where he went on to study at Stainer's Private School in Carlisle, and then Denstone College in Staffordshire. John joined the Royal Air Force in 1938, being granted a Short Service Commission in the rank of Acting Pilot Officer (on probation), with effect from 9 July 1938.⁶ He trained at No. 10 Elementary Flying Training School at Filton and Whitchurch near Bristol. He progressed to No. 8 Flying Training School at R.A.F. Montrose in Angus and gained his wings on 28 October 1938.⁷ John was confirmed in his appointment, and graded as a Pilot Officer on 16 May 1939.⁸ P/O GRIENTHWAITE received his promotion to the rank of Flying Officer on 3 September 1940.⁹

F/O GRIENTHWAITE had completed a tour of operations with No. 500 (County of Kent) Squadron in Coastal Command. He was based at R.A.F. Detling and flew Avro Ansons on coastal patrols over the English Channel. On 25 May 1940, P/O GRIENTHWAITE and his crew took off from R.A.F. Detling at 17.31 hours on a coastal patrol, in company with two other aircraft from the Squadron. At 19.12 hours, they sighted two German motor torpedo boats, and dived to attack them. The bombs failed to sink the German boats, so the aircraft attacked with machine gun fire. P/O GRIENTHWAITE's Anson, N.9731, 'U/500, was hit by return fire, which damaged the port engine. He could not maintain height, so ditched in the North Sea, fifteen miles off Texel, Netherlands. All four members of the crew, P/O GRIENTHWAITE, P/O McLUNDIE, LAC BOWERS, and AC H.C.R. HOPWOOD, were all picked up safely by H.M.S. Javelin, which had been guided to the crash scene. On 30 May 1940, GRIENTHWAITE flew Anson S/500 to search for colleagues aboard L/500, which had failed to return from an operational sortie. Sadly, they had to abort the sortie due to exceptionally poor visibility without locating their colleagues.

The Obituary in the Cumberland and Westmorland Herald, and various newspapers reported that Flying Officer A. J. GRIENTHWAITE had died as the result of an accident in the execution of his duty which occurred on 11 March 1941 in the south west of England (Braunton, Devon). There is also a Tribute from Sir William ROTHENSTEIN in his book 'Men of the R.A.F.'. Sir William served as an official war artist during World War I, and was an unofficial artist to the Royal Air Force during World War II. Sir William was commissioned by the Air Ministry to make sketches and drawings of airmen, and in his book 'Men of the RAF' wrote his memories and impressions of life lived in this war at Bomber, Fighter and other stations.

⁶ See: <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/34535/page/4815>

⁷ See: Form 1180

⁸ See: <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/34634/page/3893>

⁹ See: <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/34634/page/3893>

His book contains forty full page portraits by the artist of men of all ranks, and listed in the book is also a complete list of R.A.F. drawings from November 1939 to October 1941 including that of Flying Officer A. J. GRISENTHWAITE. In his book, Sir William pays tribute to Alfred John as follows:

About the house where I stayed the snow lay heavy on the yews and conifers, a blanket of glittering white, a magical effect which, since there was no wind, lasted for several days. The cottages in the village, built round a green, were roofed with snow; snow lay thick on the window sills, fences and gates; all sounds were muted, as though a silence brooded over the world, and the village itself seemed timeless; a village from a fairy-tale. I was indebted to the Senior Medical Officer, who kindly vacated his bedroom, for a working room, such kindness I met with everywhere while with the Air Force. The Group Captain's office was in the library of the house, a library formed in the eighteenth century, "the small old volumes dark with tarnished gold." There was a small mess only, at the head of the table his presence dominating the company, sat an ex-army captain. Among those whom the Group Captain selected to be drawn was an attractive youth Flying Office A. J. GRISENTHWAITE. In June his plane had been shot down by the enemy torpedo-boats, which he had bombed off the Dutch coast, but he made a successful landing on the water and he and his crew were saved some hours later by a destroyer. But alas, a few weeks after I made my drawing, I heard he had been killed in action. His friend sat to me wearing a German helmet, obtained from an airman whose plane he had shot down, and with his classical profile – so close was his appearance to one of Leonardo's warriors – one was tempted to add a panache to the helmet! I also drew a young WAAF decorated for her courage during the attack on the aerodrome, when she rescued a number of wounded men, dragging them, under fire, from their billets.

It will be difficult for his numerous friends to realise that this gay spirit is no more, a life of promise cut off so early, for he would have been 21 in a few days. In years, he was little more than a boy, but in outlook efficiency and understanding he was a man. Fearless and determined, yet withal modest and unassuming, he was a true sportsman without an enemy and beloved by all. If to leave behind a fragrant and lasting memory is one of life's rewards he has surely earned it.

At the time of his death, his parents were living at a property called 'Oakhurst', Victoria Avenue, Didsbury, Manchester. John GRISENTHWAITE was unmarried.

41181 Flying Officer Cecil John HITCH, R.A.F.

Cecil John HITCH was born on 12 May 1915 in London. At the time of his death, his parents were living at 150, Churchbury Road, Eltham, London S.E.9. He was granted a Short Service Commission in the Royal Air Force on 25 July 1939 as a Pilot Officer on probation and was confirmed in his appointment with effect from 25 October 1939.

He was promoted to the rank of Flying Officer on 3 September 1940. He was buried on 15 March 1941 in the churchyard of St. John the Baptist, Eltham, in the borough of Greenwich.

741239 Sergeant Thomas DYKES, R.A.F.V.R.

Thomas DYKES was born in 1913 in Rutherglen, Lanarkshire. He was the first child and eldest son of Thomas DYKES (1881 – 1951) and his wife Agnes Calderwood DYKES (1887 – 1941). Thomas (senior) was born on 5 December 1881 in Ochiltree, Ayrshire, but two years later, the family were living in Glasgow. After leaving school, Thomas (senior) gained employment as a commercial traveller in the rubber and asbestos industry, and in 1911 he married Agnes Calderwood ROBB.

Thomas and Agnes lived at Stonelaw, Rutherglen Burgh in Lanarkshire. Their first child, Thomas, was born in 1913, followed by another son Gabriel Robb DYKES, who was born on 20 October 1925 in Rutherglen. He lived until 1986. Agnes died on 12 May 1941 in Kelvingrove, Lanarkshire, just two months after the death of her eldest son. It is not known whether the proximity of the two deaths is of any significance. Thomas (senior) died on 1 December 1951 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, and he is buried in Rutherglen.

Sgt DYKES's service number suggests that he enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve at some date after January 1937 and prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Conclusions

The conclusions regarding this accident appear straightforward, in that an experienced air crew, flying to a new base, crashed into high ground in bad weather. This type of accident is now known as C.F.I.T., standing for Controlled Flight into Terrain. This term is used for an accident where an airworthy aircraft, under a pilot's control, is unintentionally flown into the ground, usually high ground, mountainside, or a body of water. It is likely that the air crew were unaware of the impending danger until the last few seconds before disaster.

David HOWELLS, a former pilot and meteorological officer in the Royal Air Force, who served at R.A.F. Chivenor, has analysed the weather situation for 11 March 1941. The synoptic situation was a slow pressure system located near Brest, which was feeding an east-south-east air flow over the area. There were a few surface observations made that add to the information available. There was a lot of Stratus cloud, either originating from the North Sea, or formed inland overnight around the Midlands and Severn valley, which was moving west-south-west at low levels towards north Devon. Although the weather station at Hartland was giving a cloud base of 2,000 feet at 07.00 hours, there was a Stratus cloud base at a height of approximately 800 feet given at stations to the north-east of R.A.F. Chivenor, and it was probably moving west-south-west in the flow.

R.A.F. Chivenor was probably using Runway 10 for take-offs, meaning that F/O GRISENTHWAITE is likely to have taken off into the wind in an easterly direction, i.e., towards Barnstaple, and then made a left climbing turn for speed to head towards the Bristol Channel. It is conjecture, but if the wind was from a westerly direction, F/O GRISENTHWAITE would have taken off using Runway 28 and flown over Braunton Burrows, and then flown around Baggy and Morte Points off the coast of North Devon, thereby avoiding flying over land and the accident occurring.

In the experience of David HOWELLS, in this sort of air mass with cloud coming over the hills, that the cloud base was seldom below approximately 1,200 to 1,500 feet at Chivenor, however, the hills to the north-east could well be covered down to about 800 feet. The high ground around the accident site appear to have a cloud base of around 1,000 to 1,100 feet. Trentishoe Down sits about 800 feet above sea level, indicating that there was little margin of error for the pilot of Blenheim V.6098 on 11 March. This supports the original conclusion that a mistake in dead reckoning by the three pilots meant that they descended through the cloud thinking they were over the sea, when in fact they were a few miles short. After the crash, by 13.00 hours the cloud base at Hartland deteriorated to 1,500 feet, while at Bristol it remained at 800 feet.

It is important, however, to place this accident into the context of the time. The three pilots had limited navigational aids compared to an aircraft today. There was no radar in use at this time for navigation, and the pilots relied on their own skills and ability to fly safely. In bad weather, most, if not all, visual references were unavailable, meaning that a pilot had to rely on their instruments. There was no ground proximity radar, so a pilot flying across the Bristol Channel had few references to where the north coast of Devon was. Likewise, they were probably unfamiliar with the geography of North Devon, and the height of the moorland on the coast of the Bristol Channel. It is likely, therefore, that F/O GRISENTHWAITE was flying in low cloud heading towards the Bristol Channel, and thinking that he was already over the water, descended to gain some visual references, but he was a few miles short, and flew into the high ground at Trentishoe Down.

In Memoriam

11 March 1941 – Bristol Blenheim Mk. IV – V.6098

No.	Surname	Forenames(s)	Age	Date of Death	Rank	Role	Service	Service Number	Place of Burial	Grave
1.	GRISENTHWAITE ¹⁰	Alfred John	21	11/03/41	Flying Officer	Pilot	R.A.F.	40908	Penrith Cemetery	Sec. Pink, Row J.J.J.J. Grave 209.
2.	HITCH ¹¹	Cecil John	25	11/03/41	Flying Officer	Pilot	R.A.F.	41181	Eltham C'yard	Sec B. Grave 107.
3.	DYKES ¹²	Thomas		11/03/41	Sergeant	Pilot	R.A.F.V.R.	741239	Rutherglen Cemetery	Div Q. Grave 72.

¹⁰ Son of Alfred and Kathleen GRISENTHWAITE, of Didsbury, Manchester.

¹¹ Son of John and Agnes HITCH, of Eltham, London.

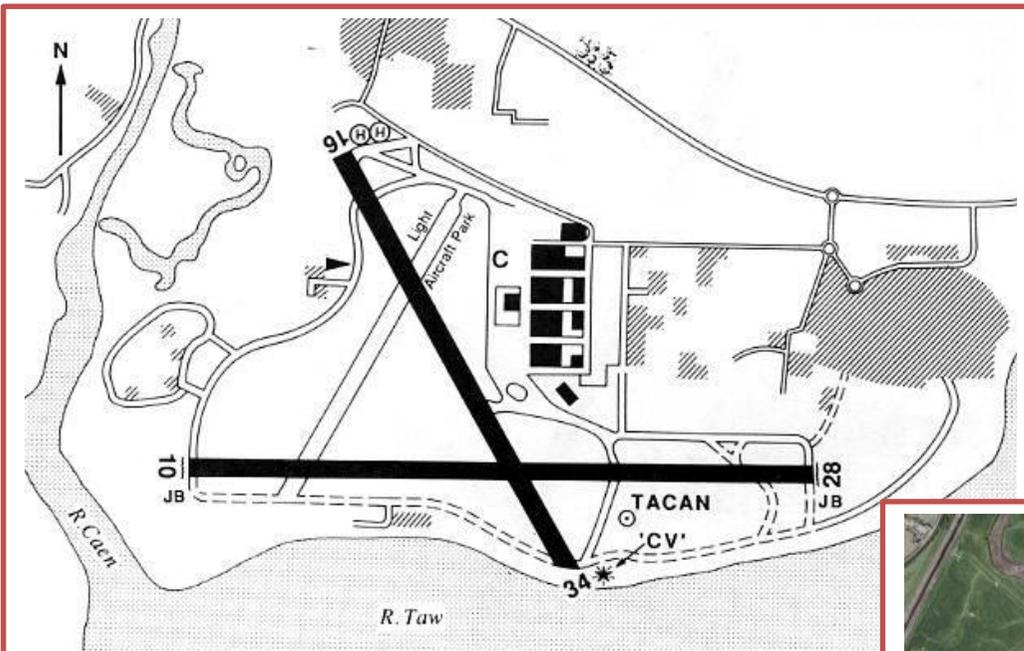
¹² Son of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas DYKES, of Rutherglen, Lanarkshire.

Map of Trentishoe Down, near Lynton, North Devon



Relationship of Trentishoe Down to R.A.F. Chivenor and R.A.F. St. Athan.





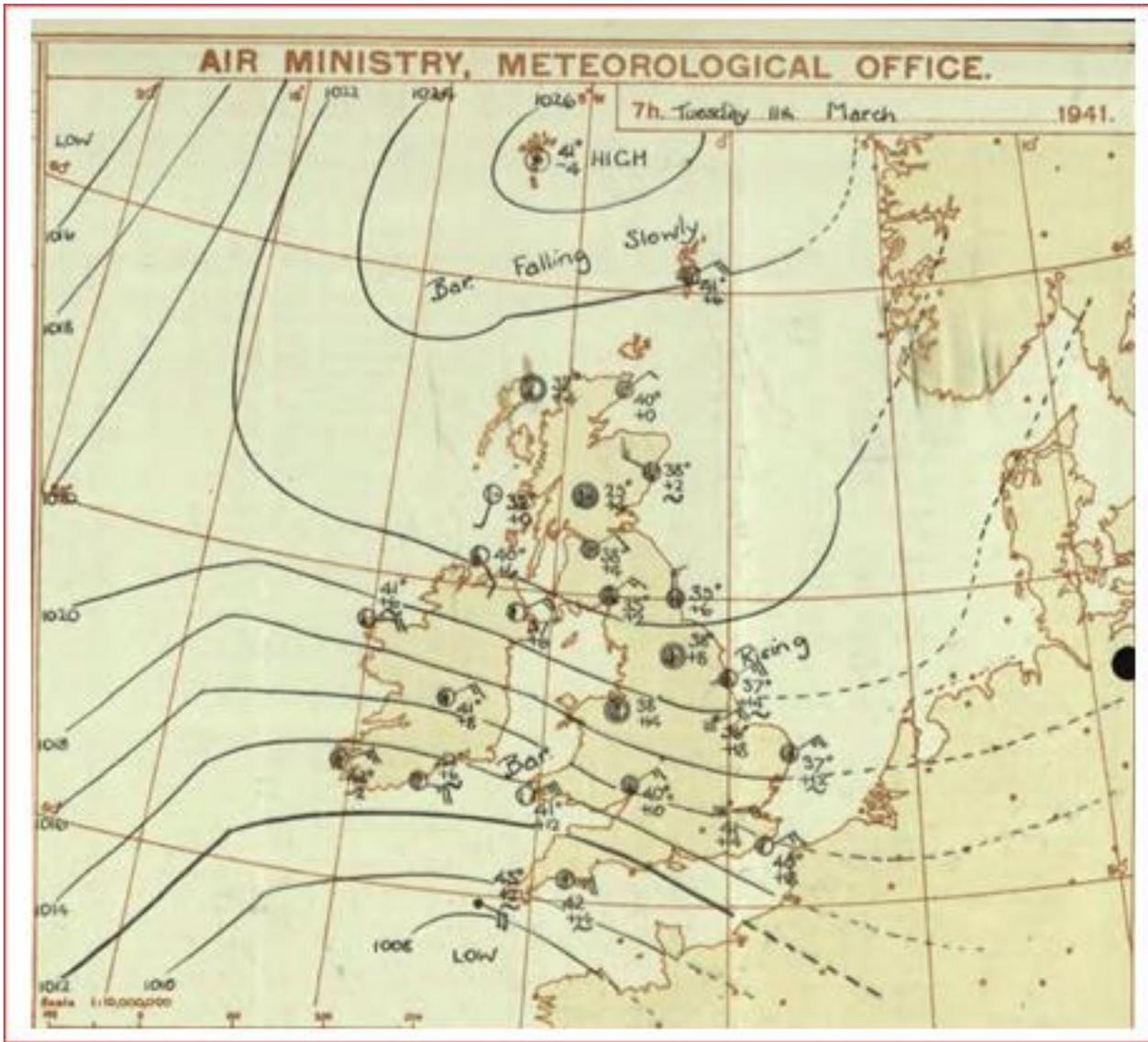
Above – The runway diagram for R.A.F. Chivenor, showing the main east-west runway 10/28, and the subsidiary runway 16/34.

Courtesy of: <http://www.ukairfieldguide.net/airfields/Chivenor>

Right – A post-war aerial photograph of R.A.F. Chivenor. The yellow lines on the runways show their original length prior to the extensions being built. The area enclosed by the red line was the extent of the former civilian airfield at Chivenor, and the blue area comprised the buildings used by the aerodrome.

Courtesy of: <http://devonairfields.hampshireairfields.co.uk/chiv.html>





Left – The weather chart for 11 March 1941.
Supplied by: David HOWELLS.



Above – A Bristol Blenheim Mk. IV aircraft similar to V.6098.

Author's Collection.

no 146 (H) FATAL

A.M. Form 1180 ✓

D	M	Y	Unit	Group	Command
11	3	41	3 OTU.	17	C

Signal No. *765c*

A.I.B. *no PR*

C of I *yes*

Aerodrome or Place *Rangiora*

Engine *MERCURY*

Aircraft *BLENHEIM IV*

Fire *as-impact*

Parachute Used *No*

Flotation Gear *Fitted*

Lives saved *W*

A/c salvaged *W*

Cause *F4*

Pilot apparently misjudged position and dived through cloud base thinking he was over the sea. Inaccurate nav. It is considered that this unit should be provided with a met. officer for accurate information regarding local conditions. AOC - MktSta approval but will not be given priority - do not

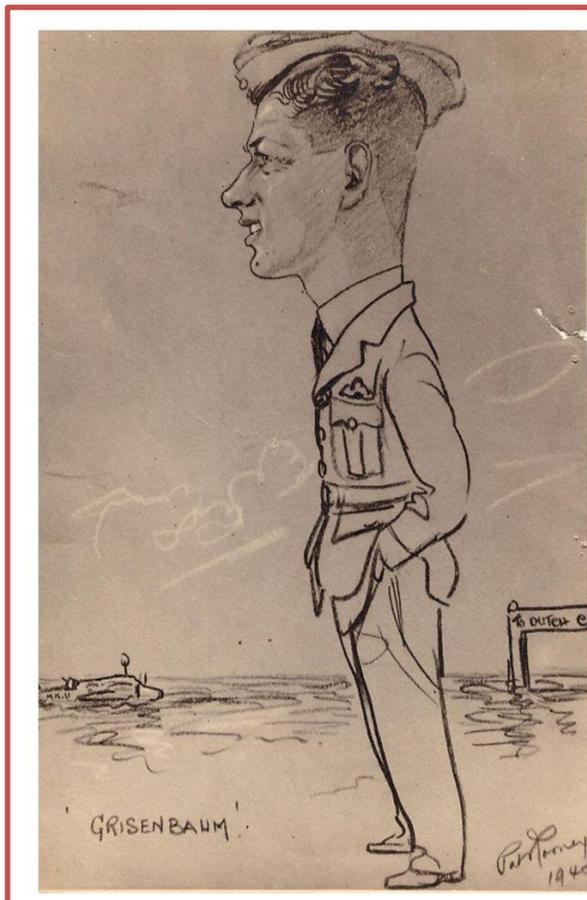
V6098

Pilot's Name	CRISANTHAKIS			
Rank	F/O			
Date of Wings	28/10/38			
Period since Wings	10 Y. 7 M. 5 D.			
Age when Qualifying	25			
Date of Birth	10/1/15			
Age at date of accident	25			
TOTAL HOURS FLOWN				
	TYPE	SOLO	DUAL	TOTAL
Accident Type		32	1	33
Others		576	62	638
Total		608	63	671
Instruments	4			
Link Trainer				
During last six months:		Night Flying Total		
Type	33.1	Type		
Others	7.1	Others	31.2	
Total	40.2	Total	31.2	

Consider its absence contrb. Met forecast did not contain the words "a low sea level" after value of cloud ht. fact that cloud base was likely to be lower over high gull was not clearly emphasised.

Above Left and Right – The Form 1180 for the loss of Blenheim V.6098.

Courtesy of the Air Historical Branch



Left and Above – Two drawings of the then P/O GRISENTHWAITE made by Sir Williem ROSENSTIEN.

Right – F/O Alfred John GRISENTHWAITE

Courtesy of: Facebook – The GRISENTHWAITE Name Through Time

Brilliant Pilot is Killed on Eve of 21st Birthday

ONCE SAVED FROM SEA

BRILLIANT scholar and athlete, Flying Officer A. J. Grisenthwaite, whose death on active service has occurred on the eve of his 21st birthday, is the younger son of Mrs. A. Grisenthwaite, Victoria Avenue, Didsbury, and the late Mr. A. Grisenthwaite, a Penrith contractor.

Educated at Penrith Grammar School and Denstone College, Staffordshire, he joined the R.A.F. in 1938 as a pilot officer and was later promoted flying officer in the Coastal Command.

An Air Ministry bulletin last June described how the crew of an R.A.F. Coastal Command bomber, of which Flying Officer Grisenthwaite was a member, were saved by another bomber of the same squadron after making a forced descent on the sea.

Bombed Torpedo Boats

Besides raking them with machine-gun fire, Flying-Officer Grisenthwaite's aircraft dived and bombed two German motor-torpedo boats off the Dutch coast. A heavy curtain of anti-aircraft fire was encountered and still under control. Flying-Officer Grisenthwaite's machine disappeared into mist close to the sea.

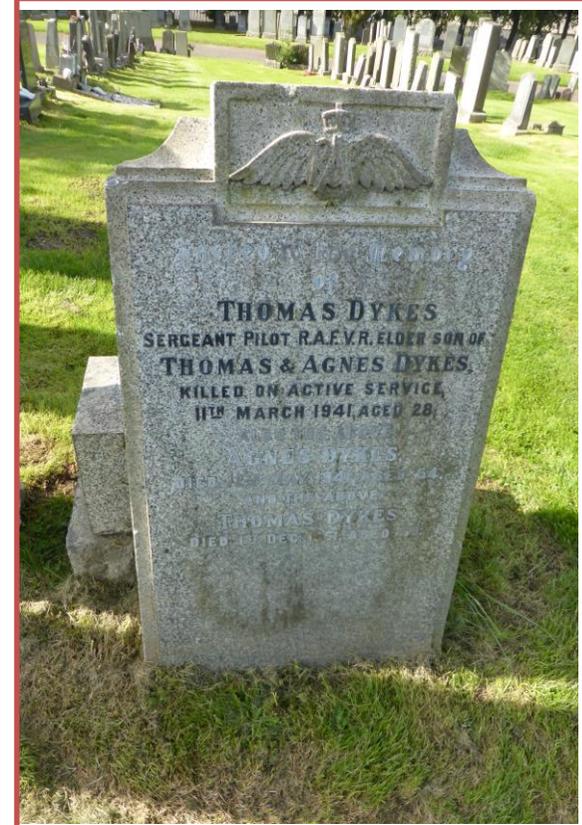
Seeing it down in the sea, another aircraft of the patrol flew away and guided a destroyer to the scene. The crew were taken on board the warship.

As a scholar Flying-Officer Grisenthwaite was awarded a £50 exhibition at Denstone College.



Flying-Officer Grisenthwaite.

Hoist Victim Gets £500



Above Left – The headstone on the grave of F/O Alfred John GRISENTHWAITE at Penrith.

Above Centre – The headstone on the grave of F/O C. J. HITCH at Eltham.

Above Right – The headstone on the grave of Sgt Thomas DYKES, which includes his parents.

Bibliography and Sources

Primary Sources

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252 Squadron, O.R.B. The National Archives (TNA), Air Ministry Files AIR 27 1508/1 & 2
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CWGC Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Available at: <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx>

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The Last Flight of Blenheim V.6098

www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk

Robert PALMER M.A.

Published by: The Author.
