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Author: Robert PALMER, M.A.



Avro Anson Mk. I K.6183
No. 206 Squadron

THE LAST FLIGHT OF:

ANSON N.9676

A narrative of the last flight of Anson N.9676, from R.A.F. Chivenor, which crashed into Barnstaple Bay on 26 March 1941. The two pilots were declared, 'Missing, presumed dead'.
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The Last Flight of Anson W.9676

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

For those of us fortunate enough to live in a country, where at the time we are living there, peace and stability are taken for granted, we might find it difficult to understand what it was like to live through a period of war, in particular, total war. Yet, in the 20th Century, this occurred not once, but twice, for the majority of the population of the globe. Of these two wars, the Second World War was the most deadly, disruptive to society, and economically disastrous.

Society's norms changed, rapidly in many cases, so that in periods of wartime, matters that were of consequence in peacetime became lost in the overall aspect of death, destruction, and hardship that wars bring. The Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede, Surrey, displays the names of over twenty-two thousand airmen of the United Kingdom, its Dominions and Empire, who disappeared during the war and have no known grave. Many of these men simply disappeared after taking off on a sortie, while with others, it is known what happened, but their bodies were never recovered.

For the families and friends, there were no answers, no closure, and neither could there be. Often, their son, father, husband, brother, uncle or friend was reported, missing. Many held hope for several months, even years, that the missing would re-appear, having been held as a prisoner of war, or missing for some other reason. During the war, as information came to light, many would receive the letter confirming the person, 'Missing, presumed Dead', although for others, confirmation did not arrive until after the war. Life for the living had to move on, children told, estates would-up, and new relationships to forge.

This is story of just two men, out of the twenty-two thousand, who are still 'Missing, presumed Dead', having apparently lost their lives just off the coast of North Devon.

The Avro Anson

The Avro Anson became known within the Royal Air Force as 'Faithful Annie', in view of its long and distinguished service with the R.A.F. throughout the Second World War and beyond. The military version of the aircraft was developed from a civil version designed for Imperial Airways. It was designed by Roy CHADWICK (who later designed the Lancaster bomber) as the Type 652. It was a low wing monoplane, fitted with two Armstrong Whitworth Cheetah Mk. V engines, giving it a cruising speed of 150 mph, and a range of 600 miles. The first two aircraft flew on 7 January 1935, fitted with an improved mark of Cheetah engine, and with an all-up weight of 7,500 lbs. The two aircraft were delivered to Imperial Airways, who used them on the Croydon to Brindisi route.

Meanwhile, the U.K. government had commenced a rearmament programme to meet the threat being posed by Germany's increasing military presence in Europe. In May 1934, the Air Ministry issued a requirement for a twin-engine landplane to be used on maritime reconnaissance, and to address the perceived threat from German submarines in the event of war.

Avro were one of fifteen firms to submit bids to the Air Ministry, and with their modern design, they were awarded the contract for the Avro 652A. The first flight of the military version took place on 24 March 1935, in competition with the De Havilland Rapide biplane. The Avro design, fitted with a turret, outclassed the De Havilland design, so on 27 August 1935, the Air Ministry placed a contract with Avro for one-hundred and seventy-four aircraft, now called the Anson.

The first production aircraft, K.6152, was flown at Woodford in Lancashire (the home of Avro) on 31 December 1935, and the first Ansons entered R.A.F. service at R.A.F. Manston in Kent with No. 48 (General Reconnaissance) Squadron on 6 March 1936. It had two firsts, as the first monoplane in R.A.F. service, and the first aircraft fitted with a retractable undercarriage.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the Anson equipped six R.A.F. squadrons:

- No. 48 Squadron now at Thorney Island, Sussex,
- No. 206 Squadron at R.A.F. Bircham Newton, Norfolk,
- No. 217 Squadron at R.A.F. Warmwell, Dorset,
- No. 220 Squadron at R.A.F. Thornaby, North Yorkshire,
- No. 223 Squadron at R.A.F. Leuchars, Fife,
- No. 269 Squadron at R.A.F. Montrose, Angus.

In addition to the six Regular squadrons of the Royal Air Force, the Anson equipped four squadrons of the Auxiliary Air Force, in effect the part-time reserve, or Territorial element, of the R.A.F. The four squadrons were:

- No. 500 (County of Kent) Squadron, at R.A.F. Detling, Kent,
- No. 502 (Ulster) Squadron, at R.A.F. Aldergrove, County Antrim,
- No. 608 (North Riding) Squadron, at R.A.F. Thornaby, North Yorkshire,
- No. 612 (County of Aberdeen) Squadron, at R.A.F. Dyce, Aberdeenshire.

Although, at this time, the Anson was primarily an operational aircraft, it also equipped the School of General Reconnaissance at R.A.F. Thorney Island, and the No. 1 Coast Artillery Cooperation Unit at R.A.F. Gosport, the former being in Sussex and the latter in Hampshire.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, despite being the most modern aircraft in the R.A.F. at the time of its inception, just three and half years later, the Anson was approaching obsolescence. Coastal Command were beginning to receive deliveries of the Lockheed Hudson from the U.S.A., another passenger aircraft modified for military use. These were purchased by the R.A.F. following a trade mission to the U.S.A. just prior to the war. No. 224 Squadron at R.A.F. Leuchars commenced receiving Hudson aircraft in August 1939, but deliveries were slow.

The Hudson was superior to the Anson as more powerful engines were fitted, giving greater speed and a longer range. In addition, it could carry a bigger bomb load, as early actions confirmed that the small bomb load of the Anson was ineffective against U-boats and surface vessels. In spite of its increasing obsolescence, the Anson remained in front line service until December 1941.

Meanwhile, the use of the Anson for training purposes was being recognised. Its large, glazed cabin was ideal for navigator, wireless operator, and air gunner training. More Ansons were built as the war progressed, including 1,528 that were shipped to Canada. When production of the Anson ceased in May 1952, 8,138 aircraft had been built in the U.K., with a further 2,882 built in Canada. The Anson did not retire officially from R.A.F. service until 28 June 1968.

R.A.F. Chivenor, and No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit

Opened at R.A.F. Chivenor in North Devon on 27 November 1940, this O.T.U. took on the responsibility for training Beaufort crews in torpedo and bombing sorties. The intention was for No. 3 (C) O.T.U. to move towards training crews for the increasing number of Whitley and Wellington aircraft being used by Coastal Command, with a new No. 5 (C) O.T.U. opening at R.A.F. Turnberry in Scotland to train the Beaufort crews. Delays in the completion of R.A.F. Turnberry led to a change of plan, with No. 3 (C) O.T.U. being redesignated as No. 5 (C) O.T.U. on 1 August 1941, to remain training personnel on the Beauforts, while a new No. 3 (C) O.T.U. opened at R.A.F. Cranwell on 29 July 1941 to train Whitley and Wellington crews for Coastal Command.

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.

When the U.K. and France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, the Air Ministry closed the airfield under emergency Regulations, and then requisitioned the site. Although the Air Ministry requisitioned North Devon Airport immediately after the outbreak of the war, the Royal Air Force did not use the site until 1940. As originally developed, Royal Air Force Chivenor had the same boundaries on the North, South and West as it has now, but the Eastern boundary was a lane which ran South through Chivenor village to the River Taw. This land belonged to Sir William WILLIAMS, and was farmed by the REED brothers of Chivenor Farm, which was in the village, and Marsh Farm, which stood roughly in the centre of the triangle formed by the present runways.

After the usual Devon hedgerows and earth banks between the fields had been removed and two streams flowing southwards across the site had been culverted, the Air Ministry Works Directorate moved in, under the direction of Mr. L. DOWNS, who in 1959 completed 19 years' service as Clerk of Works at Chivenor. The first building work started in May 1940, on the officers' lines, and on 21st 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 airmens' 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. The final development of the airfield took place in 1950 with the laying of the concrete Aircraft Servicing Platforms.

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 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 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. The next day, Flying Officer J. E. CAMPBELL arrived from Headquarters, 15 Group, to assume the appointment of Station Administration Officer, for which he received promotion to the rank of Acting Flight Lieutenant.

Wing Commander M. V. RIDGEWAY came from Headquarters No. 15 Group to become the first Station Commander on Monday, 28 October 1940. At the end of October, the strength of R.A.F. Chivenor was four officers, and twenty other ranks. The next key arrivals were Pilot Officer A. S. PINE-COFFIN and P/O T. M. CHADWICK, who arrived on 4 November 1940; the former from R.A.F. Heston as Adjutant, and the latter from R.A.F. Loughborough as Assistant Adjutant. Two more arrivals came on 6 November, Squadron Leader F. R. OFFORD from the Air Ministry to assume the duties of Station Headquarters Officer, and P/O C. G. RICKARDS from No. 1 Maintenance Unit at Kidbrooke. Flight Lieutenant A. D. CLEUGH-FAIR was the first flying appointment, arriving on 9 November from R.A.F. Gosport for Flying Instructor duties. The first W.A.A.F. appointment was Assistant Section Officer M. E. WILLIAMSON, who arrived from Leighton Buzzard on 11 November for C. & C. duties. Flying Officer H. W. GILL arrived on 14 November, on being posted from No. 1 (C) O.T.U. at R.A.F. Silloth for Signal Duties.

On 17 November 1940, the build-up of the new R.A.F. station continued with the appointment of F/L T. A. HUNT from No. 13 M.U. at R.A.F. Henlow as the new Station Medical Officer. On this date, the formal notification came through that No. 3 (C) O.T.U. was to be formed in accordance with temporary establishment WAR/CC/166. F/L J. W. CADDY arrived from R.A.F. Gosport on 19 November to assume marine craft duties. F/O H. THOMAS was posted on 20 November to assume the duties of Station Adjutant and with that came promotion to the rank of Acting Flight Lieutenant. A plaintive note in the O.R.B. on 21 November records that, *'a party of seventy-seven airmen arrived on posting to his unit today without any previous warning'*. On 22 November, F/L N. L. CLAXTON reported from R.A.F. Ringway near Manchester to take up duties as Station Engineering Officer, and on the same day, the Deputy Principal Medical Officer (Hygiene) of Coastal Command, G/C KEANE undertook an inspection of the medical facilities at the station.

The arrivals continued, with F/L E. H. O'FARRELL arriving from P.D.U. at R.A.F. Heston to assume the role of Station Defence Officer on 24 November. The next day, F/L G. C. WALKER arrived on being posted from R.A.F. Squires Gate at Blackpool for duties as a flying instructor, and in doing so received promotion to the rank of Acting Squadron Leader. P/O C. N. PRENTICE also arrived on this day, this time from R.A.F. Calshot, for duties as an engineering officer. Fifty-five airmen arrived on this date.

On 27 November, the unit's first aircraft arrived from No. 1 (C) O.T.U. at R.A.F. Silloth, with their pilots and crew on attachment for flying duties. The Bristol Beaufort Mk I aircraft were:

1. L.4498 – F/L D. B. M. WRIGHT and four crew;
2. L.9905 – P/O J. F. PERCIVAL and three crew;
3. L.9932 – Sgt J. BLATCHFORD and three crew;
4. L.9949 – F/L G. H. B. HUTCHINSON and three crew;
5. L.9952 – S/L A. T. NAISH and three crew.

On Thursday 28 November, five Avro Anson aircraft arrived from No. 1 (C) O.T.U. flown by officers who were on attachment to R.A.F. Chivenor for flying duties. These aircraft were:

1. N.9634 – F/O R. P. J. RADBOURNE;
2. N.9641 – P/O B. J. KLECHA;
3. N.9679 – P/O J. POLNIK;
4. N.9726 – P/O F. JAKUSZ-GOSTOMSKI;¹
5. N.9891 – S/L J. W. BUCHANAN.

Three of these pilots were Polish, who had arrived in the U.K. and joined the Royal Air Force, although remaining members of the Polish Air Force. Friday, 29 November 1940, saw further moves in establishing the structure of the new base and operational training unit. F/L G. C. WALKER was appointed Chief Flying Instructor, and F/L A. D. CLEUGH-FAIR appointed Chief Ground Instructor. S/L A. T. NAISH was appointed to command 'A' Flight, with S/L J. W. BUCHANAN commanding 'B' Flight. Forty airmen arrived at the base without prior notification.

On Saturday, 30 November, another twenty-one airmen arrived, making the strength of No. 3 (C) O.T.U. forty officers, one W.A.A.F. officer, forty-four senior non-commissioned officers, and five-hundred and fifty airmen. Of these, four-hundred and fifty-two airmen were living on camp, with all the officers and the remainder of the airmen living in billets in the Braunton and Barnstaple districts. The accommodation for the officers and senior non-commissioned officers had not been built by this date, and the development of the station was still very much work in progress. Yet, it was on this date that conversion instruction of pilots to Beauforts and Ansons commenced at R.A.F. Chivenor, the first military use of the new airfield.

¹ In the O.R.B., his name is spelt as JAKURR-GOSTOMSKI

The first operational squadron at Chivenor was No. 252 Squadron, equipped with Beaufighters, and initially some Blenheims. On 4 December 1940, S/L R. G. YAXLEY reported from Headquarters Coastal Command with instructions to form this squadron at Chivenor.² 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.

On 11 December, two more aircraft and pilots arrived to join No. 3 (C) O.T.U., both Ansons coming from No. 1 (C) O.T.U. at R.A.F. Silloth:

1. K.6226 – F/O W. BERINGER;
2. N.4954 – Sgt Jozef ARMANOWSKI, P.A.F.

On Friday, 13 December, two Fairey Battle aircraft arrived by air from No. 1 (C) O.T.U. at R.A.F. Silloth, with their pilots, for flying duties at R.A.F. Chivenor. The R.A.F. was using Battles at this time for gunnery training and target towing. The two aircraft were:

1. L.5691 – Sgt KUBACHI;³
2. L.5771 – F/L D. W. S. IRELAND.

On Monday, 23 December 1940, R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 3 (C) O.T.U. suffered its first fatal air crash. 745212 Sgt James BLATCHFORD had arrived at R.A.F. Chivenor from R.A.F. Silloth on 27 November, with his crew of three, flying Beaufort L.9932. That evening, Sgt BLATCHFORD took off in Beaufort L.9943, together with 907094 LAC GREENWOOD, for a night flying training sortie. The aircraft crashed soon after take-off, killing Sgt BLATCHFORD, and seriously injuring LAC GREENWOOD. The aircraft was destroyed.⁴

Despite the rigours of food-rationing and wartime shortages, on the station's first Christmas Day, six-hundred and ten airmen, and thirty-four of the 10th Bn. The Royal Berkshire Regt. (attached for airfield defence duties) were served with a Christmas dinner of turkey and Christmas pudding by the officers and senior N.C.O.s. Until the end of 1940, the domestic arrangements were complicated by the fact that neither the Officers', or the Sergeants', messes had been completed, so all the officers and senior non-commissioned officers had to be billeted out. On 26 December, the Officers' Mess was opened for luncheons, a sign that progress was being made. A major event in the history of R.A.F. Chivenor occurred on 30 December 1940, when twenty pilots of No. 42 Squadron arrived to undertake a conversion course on Bristol Beauforts. The actual course commenced the next day.

² 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.

³ Sgt KUBACHI is probably Maksymilian KUBACKI, who had the service number 780412. He was born on 7 May 1914, and served throughout the war, ending with the rank of F/L. He served for a time with No. 300 (Polish) Squadron, and was awarded the D.F.C.. He died on 26 May 2007 in Warsaw, Poland.

⁴ Form 540 ORB November 1940 AIR

The end of the year was marked with the arrival of F/O G. G. HARTILL, who arrived from Headquarters, No. 17 Group, as the Assistant Medical Officer. This made the strength of R.A.F. Chivenor, including the operational training unit, as seventy-nine officers, three W.A.A.F. officers, one-hundred senior non-commissioned officers, and seven-hundred and forty-six airmen. Of these, seven-hundred and thirteen non-commissioned officers and airmen lived on the base, all the others were living in billets in the Braunton and Barnstaple districts.

The construction programme for R.A.F. Chivenor was reaching its conclusion, marked by the opening of the Officers' Mess on 3 January 1941, and the Sergeants' Mess the next day. These were wooden huts, as were most of the buildings (other than the hangers) at R.A.F. Chivenor. W/C RIDGEWAY and thirty-one officers moved into the Officers' Mess, and eighty-nine senior non-commissioned officers into the Sergeants' Mess from billets around the locality. During the Second World War, the R.A.F. maintained a distinction between commissioned and non-commissioned aircrew, so men who flew together, fought together, and sometimes died together, could be living in separate messes at their base.

On Monday, 13 January 1941, No. 1 Course of Instruction – Beauforts, commenced, but the number of students on this course is not recorded. It was to conclude 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. The syllabus at No. 3 (C) O.T.U. is not known, but a general indication 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.

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 special 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. 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.

Once a pilot was passed as competent for flying solo, they would team up with an Observer (Navigator), and two Wireless Operators/Air Gunners. It was the practice of Coastal Command to train aircrew as wireless operators and qualified air gunners to allow flexibility in their duties, and for aircrew to interchange roles on long sorties to avoid becoming stale. 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.

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. 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 Torpedo Training Unit at R.A.F. Abbotsinch, near Glasgow.

Elements of the training syllabus at No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit 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;
- Drills:
 - Ditching and Dinghy;
 - Parachute;
 - Fire;
 - Crash;
- Operational Procedures:
 - Formation Flying;
 - Attack Profiles.

No. 3 (C) O.T.U. gained seven new aircraft on 15 January, these being:

1. Beaufort L.4458 from R.A.F. St. Eval;
2. Beaufort L.9955 from R.A.F. Abbotsinch;
3. Beaufort L.9836 from R.A.F. Abbotsinch;
4. Beaufort L.9858 from R.A.F. Abbotsinch;
5. Beaufort L.9809 from R.A.F. Abbotsinch;
6. Anson N.9676 from R.A.F. Silloth;
7. Anson N.5371 from R.A.F. Dyce.

Anson N.9676 was the aircraft destined to be lost on 26 March 1941. Two more aircraft arrived the following day, namely:

1. Beaufort L.4497 from R.A.F. Silloth;
2. Anson N.9628 from R.A.F. St. Eval.

On 16 January, a revised Establishment was issued for R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 3 (C) O.T.U. from Headquarters, Coastal Command. This showed a considerable increase in personnel to be stationed at R.A.F. Chivenor. With the increase in the Establishment, the status of the Commanding Officer was raised with the posting of G/C J. H. SADLER from No. 9 Air Crew Selection Board to command R.A.F. Chivenor. In addition, another ninety-four airmen arrived on being posted to the base. On 20 January, a key arrival was that of F/L S. M. BOAL, known as 'Sammy' BOAL, an experienced pilot who was posted from R.A.F. St. Eval for flying duties as an instructor at the O.T.U.. The change in command took place on Thursday, 23 January, when G/C J. H. SADLER took over command of the station from W/C M. V. RIDGEWAY. W/C RIDGEWAY signed off the Operations Record Book for the last time as Commanding Officer, and assumed his new appointment as Chief Instructor at No. 3 (C) O.T.U.. S/L G. C. WALKER became the Chief Ground Instructor at the O.T.U..

On 28 January, S/L J. W. BUCHANAN left Chivenor on being posted to No. 217 Squadron, a Beaufort equipped unit at R.A.F. St. Eval. On the same date, S/L A. T. NAISH ceased his attachment on his posting to No. 22 Squadron, another Beaufort equipped unit. F/L BOAL received notification of his award of the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service while flying with No. 217 Squadron. On 30 January, S/L H. E. R. NELSON arrived from Headquarters No. 17 Group to assume the duties as Anson Flying Instructor and Commanding Officer of 'B' Flight, in place of S/L BUCHANAN, and F/L BOAL assumed command of 'A' Flight in place of S/L NAISH.

On the last day of the month, the strength of the station was sixty-six officers, three W.A.A.F. officers, two-hundred and sixteen senior non-commissioned officers, and one-thousand, four-hundred and seventy-five airmen. Of these, thirty-seven officers, one-hundred and fifty-eight senior non-commissioned officers, and one-thousand, three hundred and six airmen were accommodated in R.A.F. Chivenor, with twenty-nine officers, the three W.A.A.F. officers, sixty-eight non-commissioned officers, and one-hundred and sixty-nine airmen billeted in the Barnstaple and Braunton areas.

The month of February began with some inclement weather. On Sunday, 2 February, heavy snow required the activation of the Snow Plan to clear the runways for use. On 16 February, two Beauforts from the station co-operated with the Home Guard on a practice invasion exercise.⁵ The outcome of the exercise is not recorded, unfortunately. A portent of future issues arose on 17 February with the visit of F/L K. SLINGSBY-FAHN, the Coastal Command Messing Officer, who inspected the Officers' and Airmens' Messes regarding the alterations required to the kitchens. The rapid increase in the numbers of personnel living at R.A.F. Chivenor appears to have placed demands on the kitchens that they struggled to cope with. This theme of poor standards of food at R.A.F. Chivenor continues through the Second World War, with the Canadians in particular being very critical of the food served at the base.

No. 3 (C) O.T.U. suffered its second fatality in the evening of Tuesday, 18 February 1941. That evening, at about 21.40 hours, 741895 Sgt A. H. S. EVANS took off from R.A.F. Chivenor on a solo night flying training flight in Beaufort Mk. I L.9829. The aircraft was seen to climb too steeply, it turned through 180 degrees, and then flew into a hill about one mile north of Chivenor, near Heanton Punchardon church.⁶ Sgt EVANS, the only occupant, was rescued alive, albeit seriously injured. An ambulance took him to the North Devon Infirmary in Barnstaple, where he died from his injuries the next day at 16.45 hours.⁷ An Australian serving in the Royal Air Force, his family requested that his body be taken to Cockburnspath Parish Church in Berwickshire for burial.⁸

The routine of R.A.F. Chivenor continued in spite of the second fatal crash, with heavy snow during the night of 20 February. On Sunday, 23 February, tragedy came to the base with the death from gunshot wounds of 42824 Pilot Officer M. A. ESPLIN. Malcolm Alexander ESPLIN was a member of the Royal Air Force, who was granted a short service commission of four years on the active list with effect from 23 October 1939, with the rank of Acting Pilot Officer.⁹ He was promoted to the rank of Pilot Officer, on probation, with effect from 25 May 1940.¹⁰ At the time of his death, he was twenty-five years' of age, and a son of Alexander and Eva C. ESPLIN. He was buried in Grave 5587 of Section R Nonconformist, of the Southport (Duke Street) Cemetery.¹¹

Monday, 24 February 1941, was to bring further tragedy to R.A.F. Chivenor with the third fatal aircraft crash since the opening of the base. This was just six days after the crash that ultimately claimed the life of Sgt A. H. S. EVANS. At 20.20 hours, P/O H. MUNDAY crashed while night flying, with the aircraft bursting into flames, killing the pilot and sole occupant. His was flying Beaufort L.9858, which was one of those delivered from R.A.F. Abbotsinch in January.

⁵ Although recorded as an invasion exercise, it is presumed it was more of an anti-invasion exercise. Alternatively, perhaps the Home Guard had developed more offensive aspirations.

⁶ The Operations Record Book (AIR 28/152), describes the location of the crash as '*near Chivenor Church*'. There is not church at Chivenor, so it is assumed to mean the Parish Church at Heanton Punchardon, just above R.A.F. Chivenor. The O.R.B. records his name as Sgt H. S. EVANS,

⁷ See: <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/rolls/R2094483/> and AIR 28/152

⁸ See: <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2812310/EVANS,%20ANDREW%20HAROLD%20SARGENT>

⁹ See: <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/34727/page/7500>

¹⁰ See: <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/34898/page/4363>

¹¹ See: <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2700549/ESPLIN,%20MALCOLM%20ALEXANDER>

The aircraft dived into the ground at Branton Great Field, close to the airfield, for an unknown reason. Herbert MUNDY, who was known as Bob, was a South African from Durban. He was buried with full military honours in the afternoon of 1 March 1941, at St. Augustine's Church, Heanton Punchardon, on the high ground overlooking R.A.F. Chivenor.

On 24 February, Avro Anson W.1884 was delivered to R.A.F. Chivenor, and was allocated to 'D' Flight on its arrival. On 25 February, F/O R. P. J. RADBOURNE was posted from 'C' Flight (Ansons), to 'F' Flight (Battles). On 27 February, W/C L. W. C. BOWER arrived to complete a short (ten-day) conversion course onto Beauforts at No. 3 (C) O.T.U., before assuming command of No. 217 Squadron. With a total strength of almost one-thousand, eight-hundred personnel now based at R.A.F. Chivenor, concern was raised about the possibility of the unit suffering heavy casualties in the event of such an enemy air attack developing, and so one-hundred and fifty airmen, and soldiers, from the station were provided with dispersed sleeping quarters off the station. Wrafton Rectory, Chivenor Cottage, St. Brannock's Hall and the Masonic Hall, Branton were all requisitioned by the Air Ministry to provide this dispersed accommodation.

March 1941 started routinely, with the training programme for No. 1 Course continuing in spite of the loss of two pilots, with various movements to and from R.A.F. Chivenor. By now, No. 3 (C) O.T.U. at R.A.F. Chivenor comprised:

'A' Flt.	Beaufort
'B' Flt.	Beaufort
'C' Flt.	Anson, Blenheim
'D' Flt.	Anson, Blenheim
'F' Flt	Battle (For target towing)

No. 1 Beaufort Course finished on 2 March, although the next destination of the aircrew concerned is not recorded. P/O W. J. WARREN was posted to R.A.F. Gosport, and P/O J. R. P. DUNLOP arrived from the School of Aeronautical Engineering at R.A.F. Henlow. The main arrivals were ten Pilot Officers who were posted from No. 3 School of General Reconnaissance at R.A.F. Squires Gate near Blackpool.

The funeral service for P/O MUNDY was held on 1 March, at St. Augustine's Church, at Heanton Punchardon, overlooking the airfield. W/O LOVELL, R.A.F. Chivenor's senior non-commissioned officer and Station Warrant Officer, paraded the funeral party at 14.30 hours at the Station Headquarters, from where the cortege left, with the coffin on a lorry, and an honour guard either side of the lorry. At the church, other aircrew acted as bearers to take the coffin into the church, after which MUNDY was buried with full military honours in the churchyard.

On 3 March, the day was notable for the crash of a German Heinkel 111 bomber on Lundy Island. The crew survived and set fire to the aircraft, to be arrested by Mr. VANOS, who was presumably the warden on the island. The German aircrew were collected and brought to the mainland for interrogation. The next day, there was a minor accident when S/L F. T. KELLY swung on take-off in Beaufort L.00460, damaging it slightly.¹²

There were three incidents on 6 March, started by W/C W. C. BOWEN slightly damaged Beaufort L.1043 when the aircraft swung on landing. Sgt N. T. LAWRENCE overshot the runway and crashed into a hedge, badly damaging Anson N.9772, but fortunately the aircrew were uninjured. P/O J. E. LINGARD damaged Beaufighter R.2198 when it swung on landing, but again the aircrew were uninjured. On 9 March 1941, P/O J. F. PERCIVAL badly damaged another Beaufort, L.9948, when his aircraft swung on landing, while he was giving dual instruction. Again, the aircrew were uninjured. That day, two aircraft hangers were blacked out so that work on repairing aircraft could be carried out at night. The next day, W/C L. W. C. BOWER crashed on landing in Beaufort L.4459, slightly damaging the undercarriage. The aircrew were uninjured.

There was another tragedy on 13 March, when Blenheim V.6098 crashed en-route from R.A.F. Chivenor to R.A.F. St. Athan in South Wales. The aircraft was destroyed, killing F/O A. GRISENTHWAITE, F/O HITCH, and Sgt T. DYKES. All three had been posted to join the embryonic No. 252 Squadron, then forming at R.A.F. Chivenor with Bristol Beaufighters. On 12 March, R.A.F. Chivenor gained three Chaplains, with effect from 1 February 1941. They were The Reverend L. J. MAW, Methodist; The Reverend F. HAYES (Roman Catholic); and The Reverend J. CLEAVER-JAMES of the United Board. A Committee of Adjustment was held on this day by No. 252 Squadron, to deal with the effects of the three airmen who died on the previous day in the crash at Trentishoe Down.

There was another non-fatal incident on 17 March when P/O I. G. MITCHELL crashed on landing in Beaufort L.4482, without any injuries being reported. On 18 March, the nature of training aircrew was highlighted by another non-fatal accident, when P/O J. O. H. WILLING on taking off in Beaufort L00460 (sic) swung the aircraft badly damaging the undercarriage.¹³ There were no casualties. On 19 March, S/L G. C. WALKER took over command of 'D' Flight, and W/C G. K. FAIRTLOUGH was posted to R.A.F. Chivenor from No. 15 Group. On 22 March, flying was cancelled due to bad weather, the first time this is noted in the Operations Record Book. An Air Raid Message Red was in place from 10.45 until 10.53 hours, with another in force between 12.25 and 13.45 hours the next day. There was an Air Raid Message Red on 25 March, from 16.57 until 17.19 hours.

¹² The aircraft registration number contained in the ORB is incorrect, and does not exist.

¹³ There are two references in the ORB to a Beaufort L00460, which must be inaccurate. This aircraft registration number was never issued, so it is probable that this refers to L.4460, a Beaufort that was based at No. 3 (C) O.T.U. at Chivenor for a period of time.

Circumstances of the Crash

On 26 March 1941, Anson L.9676 took off from R.A.F. Chivenor on a sortie to undertake instrument flying training. While flying over Barnstaple Bay, one mile west of Morte Point, North Devon, the pilots lost control of the aircraft and it crashed into the sea. The crash occurred at about 11.15 hours on that Wednesday morning. The two air crew were:

748687	Sgt D. U. DRAPER, R.A.F.V.R.	Pilot
905175	Sgt J. A. SIMPSON, R.A.F.V.R.	Pilot

The pilot of another aircraft reported how he had seen the Anson flying over the sea in Barnstaple Bay, when it made a steep turn at a height of about 800 feet. The aircraft then plunged into the sea, with neither occupant apparently surviving.¹⁴ At 11.15 hours, the Croyde Coastguard reported to the Appledore lifeboat that an aeroplane had crashed into the sea. The Resident Naval Officer at Ilfracombe passed the same information to the Ilfracombe lifeboat. The Appledore lifeboat 'Violet Armstrong' launched at 11.25 hours, followed by the Ilfracombe lifeboat 'Rosabella' at 12.20 hours. There was a slight South-Westerly wind, with a moderate swell. About a mile off Baggy and Morte Points, the lifeboats found wreckage, but no survivors. Both lifeboats collected some wreckage, which they took back to the stations. The Appledore lifeboat returned at 15.00 hours, and the Ilfracombe lifeboat arrived back at 18.15 hours. For their work, the Appledore lifeboat was awarded £7 17s 9d, and the Ilfracombe lifeboat, £17 3s.¹⁵

The two occupants of the aircraft, Sgt D. U. DRAPER and Sgt J. A. SIMPSON, were posted as missing, presumed dead. They are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial in Surrey.

Anson N.9676 was one a batch of three-hundred and fifty Mk. I aircraft, built at Newton Heath, Manchester, between September 1939 and March 1940. It was allocated from new to No. 269 Squadron, from where it was reallocated to No. 1 (C) O.T.U. at R.A.F. Silloth. This aircraft arrived at R.A.F. Chivenor from Silloth on 15 January 1941.¹⁶ The two engines were Cheetah Mk. IV, number 175723 on the port side and 175716 on the starboard. Both were installed in the airframe on 22 October 1940 and had run for just short of seventy-eight hours.

Court of Inquiry

A Form 765 (C) 'Report on Flying Accident or Forced Landing not attributable to Enemy Action' is brief, but states: *'The only information available concerning this accident is that the pilot of another aircraft saw this machine (turn) to a steep bank at a height of about 800' and then plunge into the sea. Court of Inquiry is being held.'*

¹⁴ R.A.F. Chivenor Operations Record Book TNA AIR 28/152

¹⁵ RNLI Records of Service 1939 to 1946, courtesy of Ross McNEILL.

¹⁶ STURTIVANT, R.C. *The Anson File* (Tonbridge, Air Britain Publication, 1988) p.71 and 65.

The record that the Court of Inquiry was instigated survives, but the report of their deliberations has not been located. There was a credible witness to the crash meaning that the circumstances were known, although the precise cause could not be determined as the aircraft and both pilots were lost. Sadly, it is probable that the pilot flying the aircraft at the time misjudged his turn and turned too steeply, with insufficient power applied to both engines, resulting in a stall situation, from which they had no chance to recover flying at only 800 feet above the sea.¹⁷

Accidents Investigation Branch

It does not appear that this accident was referred to the Accidents Investigation Branch of the Air Ministry as the cause was attributed to pilot error.

The Air Crew

748687 Sergeant Douglas Urban DRAPER, R.A.F.V.R.

Douglas Urban DRAPER was born on 23 January 1917, making him twenty-four years of age when he died. He was born in Ashby-de-la-Zouch in Leicestershire in the first quarter of 1917. His father was William DRAPER, and his mother Irene Alberta DRAPER, who was born on 14 February 1894, and Douglas was their only son. William DRAPER was a fruiterer, and his shop was in Station Road, Burton-on-Trent, in Staffordshire. The family lived at 75, Station Street, Burton-on-Trent (which is now demolished) and they probably lived above the shop.

DRAPER was educated at Guild Street School in Burton-on-Trent, and after leaving school, he worked for the Ministry of Supply. He was deeply involved in the life of the George Street Methodist School, and he was a Sunday School teacher and an active preacher. DRAPER enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve shortly before the declaration of war on 3 September. He had flown a total of eighty hours on all types, but only six hours fifteen minutes on the Avro Anson. DRAPER's father predeceased him, so his estate of £183 4s 2d passed to his mother.

905175 Sergeant John Allan SIMPSON, R.A.F.V.R.

John Allan SIMPSON was born on 31 March 1918 in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire so he was aged twenty-two years when he died. His father was called John Allan SIMPSON as well and appears to have originated from Peterborough as well. It appears that his family moved to South Africa as John Allan senior died on 16 November 1926 at Nels Poort Beaufort West, West Cape Province, South Africa. His estate of £909 7s 6d passed to his widow, Gertrude Ethel SIMPSON. At the time of his death, Sgt John Allan SIMPSON was living at 25, Alumhurst Road, Bournemouth, Hampshire with his mother. He left an estate of £257 4s 7d, which passed to his mother.

¹⁷ It is not confirmed which of the two pilots were flying the aircraft at the time of its loss, but the records suggest that it was Sgt D. U. DRAPER.

SIMPSON enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve shortly after the outbreak of the war at R.A.F. Uxbridge. He and Sgt DRAPER were likely to be members of No 2 Anson Course at R.A.F. Chivenor and were in the air together to practice their instrument flying as part of their training programme. When practising instrument flying, the aircraft would often be fitted with an internal hood over the windscreen, in order to limit the view of the pilots and make them focus on their instruments. Piloting an aircraft by use of its instruments was an essential element of the training programme, as it was necessary in order to fly at night and in poor visibility.

Conclusions

The loss of Anson N.9676 was one of many that occurred during training pilots and aircrew at R.A.F. Chivenor between October 1940 and 1 May 1942. The incident receives cursory coverage in the Operations Record Book and is mentioned rarely in any publications about R.A.F. Chivenor, or Coastal Command. Every death, however, was a significant personal loss to the next-of-kin, and a loss to their friends and colleagues with whom they were drinking, eating, laughing and talking only a few hours before. Douglas Urban DRAPER, and John Allan SIMPSON are just two of the twenty-thousand, two-hundred and seventy-nine men and women who died while serving with the Royal Air Force during the Second World War and have no known grave.

In Memoriam

26 March 1941 – Avro Anson Mk. I – N.9676

No.	Surname	Forenames(s)	Age	Date of Death	Rank	Role	Service	Service Number	Place of Burial	Grave
1.	DRAPER ¹⁸	Douglas Urban	24	26/03/41	Sergeant	Pilot	R.A.F.V.R.	748687	Runnymede Memorial	Panel 42.
2.	SIMPSON ¹⁹	John Allan	22	26/03/41	Sergeant	Pilot	R.A.F.V.R.	905175	Runnymede Memorial	Panel 52.

¹⁸ Son of W. and Irene Alberta DRAPER, of Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire.

¹⁹ Son of John Allan and Gertrude Ethel SIMPSON, of Westbourne, Bournemouth, Hampshire.

Map of Barnstaple (or Bideford) Bay





SERGT. PILOT DOUGLAS DRAPER.

Sergeant Pilot Douglas Urban Draper, the only son of Mrs. Draper and the late Mr. William Draper, of 73, Station Street, who is reported missing, was one of Burton's most promising church workers.

Although only 24 years of age, he endeared himself to all at George Street Methodist Church, where he grew up in the Sunday school, and from early days

showed a keen interest in the various works at this place of worship.

He was a Sunday school teacher, and often acted as leader in the intermediate department.

He was a foremost figure in George Street Group, and as a local preacher was always well received in his own and other circuits.

He was home on leave only quite recently.

Sergeant Pilot Draper volunteered for the R.A.F. before the war, and was employed by the Ministry of Supply at the time he was called up last Whitsuntide.

Where am I?

Left, Above and Right – Newspaper articles (including a photograph) of Sergeant (Pilot) Douglas Urban DRAPER, from local newspapers in Burton-on-Trent.

Courtesy of; Graham MOORE from the British Newspaper Archive

Roll of Honour.

BURTON R.A.F. PILOT MISSING.

Sergeant D. U. Draper Believed Killed.

Information has been received that Sergeant Pilot Douglas Urban Draper, the only son of Mrs. Draper and the late Mr. William Draper, of 73, Station Street, Burton, is believed to have lost his life in a flying accident.

His relatives have received a telegram stating: "Regret inform you your son, Sergeant Draper, reported missing, believed killed in flying accident."

Well known as the son of the Burton florist, Sergeant Draper was 24 years of age. He volunteered for the R.A.F. before the war, and devoted a great deal of his spare time to training. He was called up last Whitsuntide.

Before joining the R.A.F. he was employed by the Ministry of Supply. He was a Guild Street School boy.

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The Last Flight of Anson W.9676

www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk

Robert PALMER, M.A.

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