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

## THE LAST FLIGHT OF:

# BEAUFORT L.4458

A narrative of the last flight of Beaufort L.4458, which crashed near R.A.F. Chivenor on 25 April 1941, killing an instructor wireless operator/air gunner, F/Sgt D. H. PROUDMAN, R.A.F.. The pilot, Sgt C. C. N. BAILEY, R.A.F.V.R. survived, only to lose his life in the Middle East in 1943  
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## **The Last Flight of Beaufort L.4458**

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## Introduction

The concept was for pilots and aircrew that survived a tour of operations, which comprised three-hundred hours of flying on operations, to enjoy a period of rest by being posted to a training unit. Here they could pass on their experience to new pilots and aircrew. As the pilots and aircrew had only a 17.5% likelihood of surviving their first tour, the prospect of being posted to an Operational Training Unit must have seemed like a well-earned privilege.

Sadly, flying training was also a risky occupation, and instructors were required to fly with the aircrews under training to assess and train them. This meant that some personnel who had survived the rigours of an operational tour within Coastal Command, died while undertaking instructor duties at a training unit. Flight Sergeant Douglas Harry PROUDMAN was one of the unlucky instructors who was to lose his life while serving at R.A.F. Chivenor.

## The Bristol Beaufort

The Bristol Beaufort was the standard torpedo-bomber and maritime 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 that it was named after, developed the Beaufort in response to two Specifications issued by the Air Ministry. Specification M.15/35 was for a three seat, twin-engine, monoplane for use as a torpedo-bomber, and G.24/35 for a four seat, general reconnaissance bomber.

The Bristol Aeroplane Coy Ltd saw an advantage in combining both roles into a single design, and the proposed aircraft was known as the Type 152. Blackburn Aircraft Limited had developed their design, which was known as the B-26 (later known as the Botha) in response to the same two specifications, and because Blackburn had less work than Bristol (who were building the Blenheim light bombers), the B-26 was chosen to become the principal R.A.F. torpedo-bomber. Because there was little to choose between the two designs on paper, orders were placed for both aircraft. The Air Ministry decided to use the Botha to replace the Avro Anson and Vickers Vildebeest at home, while the Beaufort would replace the Vildebeest overseas. The priority given to the Blackburn design can be seen that by the time that orders for the Botha had reached one-thousand, two-hundred and fifty-six aircraft, those for the Beaufort were only four-hundred and twenty-six aircraft.

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 in essence, they were still the same design. The aircraft was a torpedo-bomber, with a crew of four: pilot, observer/navigator, wireless operator, and air gunner. 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.

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 originally armed with one 0.303 machine gun in the port wing, and a single Vickers K-type gas fed 0.303 machine gun in the B.IV Mk I turret. The aircraft was designed to carry four 250 lb bombs in the bomb bay, and one more on each wing. In theory, the Beaufort could carry six 500 lb bombs, or one 1,605 lb, eighteen-inch torpedo semi-enclosed in the bomb bay. In practice, the restrictions on range and performance imposed by a full bomb load, meant that Coastal Command restricted the aircraft to carrying up to 2,200 lbs of bombs or mines.

Both the Blackburn Botha, and the Bristol Beaufort, were planned to be powered by two, single-row, sleeve-valve, air-cooled, Bristol Perseus engines. It was predicted that this would leave both aircraft underpowered, and in order to get the Beaufort into service as quickly as possible, and because a proven low-altitude engine of higher power was not available, the Air Ministry agreed to that the new and compact, twin-row, Bristol Taurus engine would be substituted. This turned out to be a flawed design, which had been rushed into production before full testing and development had been completed. Availability of this new engine was limited, and Bristol gave priority to their own design of aircraft, leaving the Botha to continue with the Perseus engine. This effectively condemned the Blackburn Botha to failure as an operational torpedo bomber.

Problems persisted with the Bristol Taurus Mk II engines fitted to the first production Beaufort aircraft. Frequent failures with a bolt led to the connecting rods slipping from the crankshaft and thereby wrecking the engine. This would result in the loss of an engine, often accompanied by fire, with catastrophic results at low altitude. The view of the Bristol company was to use high revolutions and maximum continuous speed, but although this may have reduced the incidence of failures, it reduced the range of the aircraft significantly, and simply wore the engines out early. The de Havilland propellers were variable speed, but they could not be fully feathered, meaning that a failed engine caused a lot of drag to the aircraft. As late as March 1940, the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment (A. & A.E.E.) refused to give full and final clearance for the aircraft to enter operational service because of its poor performance on a single engine.

There were also problems with the tailwheel and tailplane, but it was engine overheating that was the main issue delaying the Beaufort's operational debut. In October 1938, the Beaufort was grounded for modifications to the cowlings and cooling gills. This still caused problems with running the engines on the ground, but in the air, matters were improved. It was decided on 16 March 1939 that of the first seventy-eight aircraft ordered, five would act as prototypes, two would be used for trials, and twenty-one would re-equip No. 100 Squadron in Singapore. The other fifty would be supplied to the Royal Australian Air Force, with No. 36 Squadron to be equipped with aircraft from the next batch.

Matters changed with the increasingly disappointing performance of the Blackburn Botha, and so the Air Ministry agreed to divert all Beauforts to home based squadrons. On 1 July 1939, an order for fifty aircraft was placed with the Australian government to supply squadrons in the Far East.

Beam guns were added to some aircraft from May 1940 onwards, and from W.6538 onwards, a Browning machine gun was fitted in the starboard wing. Then problems with the supply of the Daimler built B.IV series turrets arose. The Blenheim type turret was modified for use in the Beaufort as the B.I Mk. V turret, and this mounted twin Browning 0.303 machine guns. The first aircraft so fitted was AW.335, and these had a strengthened airframe and were designated as Mark IA Beauforts. On 27 May 1941, the Air Staff decided that Beauforts allocated to torpedo bomber squadrons should have a single Vickers K machine gun installed in the nose, but these were fitted only in aircraft used by No. 22 Squadron.

Problems with the Bristol Taurus Mk II engine nearly led to the end of the Beaufort as an operational aircraft, but there was nothing else. On 28 August 1940, due to the persistent problems with the engines, the Beaufort was withdrawn from front-line service to allow two-hundred and fifty-four aircraft to be returned to Filton for the improved Mark VI engine to be fitted. Operations resumed with No. 22 Squadron on 31 August, with No. 42 following on 28 September. The Mark IA version was fitted with the Taurus Mk. XII engine, and these were retro-fitted to surviving Mark I aircraft.

The search for a better engine led to consideration of fitting the Rolls-Royce Merlin, but this was discounted for reasons of range and performance, but the Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp S3C4 engine, was found to be suitable. Beaufort N.1110 was used as a prototype, and this led to the production of the Mark II version of the aircraft. The prototype flew for the first time in November 1940, with the first aircraft, AW.244 flying on 17 August 1941. The Twin Wasp engines developed 1,200 hp, 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. Four-hundred and fifteen Beaufort Mk. II and Mk IIA aircraft (the Mark IIA having the strengthened airframe and new turret) were built before production ceased in 1944. The Taurus equipped Beaufort was declared obsolete in 1944, and the Twin-Wasp version a year later.

One-thousand and thirteen Beaufort Mk. I aircraft were built by the Bristol Aeroplane Co. Ltd. at their main works 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. Total production was two-thousand, one-hundred and twenty-nine Beaufort aircraft, including seven-hundred built in Australia. Thirteen Beauforts were supplied to the Turkish Air Force, and these were flown until 1950. The last Beaufort was flown in the U.K. in 1946, and a consideration of its status is that it was never awarded a Civil certificate of airworthiness by the U.K. authorities. No flying examples remain today, and only two as static exhibits.

Beaufort Mk. VIII (the Australian version of the Mark IIA) A9-557 can be seen at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. There is a Beaufort on display at the R.A.F. Museum, which is displayed as Mark IIA, DD.931. It is in fact built from parts from several Australian Mk. VIII aircraft, the main airframe coming from A9-559.

## Operational Deployment

The Bristol Beaufort was approved to be allocated to R.A.F. squadrons in September 1939, and they entered service in November 1939, with No. 22 Squadron, based at Thorney Island, Sussex. The Beauforts superseded Vickers Vildebeest biplanes, and were a marked improvement in capability for the squadron. The conversion to the new aircraft continued until the last Vildebeest left in February 1940. 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 different from the Beaufort. Trials at the Torpedo Development Unit at R.A.F. Gosport showed serious problems with torpedoes dropped from high-speed aircraft. To remedy this, a larger and detachable air tail was fitted, which resulted in the torpedo being carried in a nose-up attitude, as opposed to the preferred nose-down manner. These issues were overcome, and the Beaufort had several successes as a torpedo-bomber, particularly in the Mediterranean.

On 8 April 1940, No. 22 Squadron moved to R.A.F. North Coates in Lincolnshire, to cover the North Sea, as a 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 it received its first Beaufort (L.4489) in April 1940. This coincided with a move to R.A.F. Thorney Island 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.

Due to the shortage of aircraft and trained pilots, with effect from 19 October 1940, other Beauforts were transferred from No. 48 Squadron, which had flown only one sortie with the Beauforts on 17 October 1940. No. 217 Squadron remained at R.A.F. St. Eval until October 1941, when it moved to R.A.F. Thorney Island, 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 it 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 only other Home-based squadrons using the Bristol Beaufort were No. 489 Squadron, R.N.Z.A.F. and No. 415 Squadron, R.C.A.F.. The former was due to receive Beauforts in August 1941 at its base at R.A.F. Leuchars, but it converted to Beaufighters instead. For a short period of time, the latter operated some Beauforts while stationed at R.A.F. Thorney Island from September 1941 until 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 air crew 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 provided with 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, 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, they would radio back to base 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. F/O K. CAMPBELL and his air crew flew in one of these aircraft, and he 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 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, including the shortage of torpedoes, and the lack of experienced pilots and air crew. The pilot aimed and dropped the bombs or torpedoes. The torpedoes had to be dropped at low speed, about 160 mph, at a height of about seventy feet, and at a range of about 750 yards from the target, to achieve the likelihood of a hit against any target moving at speed. The course at the Torpedo Training Unit 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.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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 was another attack in May 1942 against the Prinz Eugen, with No. 86 Squadron even failing to find the German battle cruiser.

After the entry of Italy into the Second World War in June 1940, the Mediterranean became the main areas of operations for the British Armed Forces. Requests were made from late-1940 onwards for Beauforts to be deployed to the Mediterranean, but the Air Ministry blocked these due to the problems with engine cooling persisting. The strategic considerations led to the move east of the Beaufort Squadrons, leaving the Hampdens to cover Home waters pending the development of the Beaufighter as a torpedo-bomber. 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 onwards to join the other two squadrons in Ceylon. No. 86 Squadron remained in the U.K., and it 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 converting to fly Liberators on anti-submarine duties.

In the Mediterranean, No. 39 and 47 Squadrons operated Beauforts from August 1941 onwards flying from Egypt and Malta, but 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. 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 air crews from No. 86 Squadron. The first operation mounted by the Squadron using Beauforts took place on 28 January 1942 with an attack on an Italian convoy.

A detachment of No. 217 Squadron arrived at R.A.F. Luqa on the island of Malta in June 1942, and they launched a successful attack on the Italian fleet on 15 June. By July 1942, Beauforts of No. 86 Squadron had also arrived on Malta, and these were absorbed into a reconstituted No. 39 Squadron, which had suffered heavy casualties. This allowed No. 217 Squadron to move onwards to Ceylon. No. 47 Squadron had started the war based in the Sudan. It moved to Egypt in December 1941, and in July 1942, it began its conversion to the Bristol Beaufort.

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<sup>1</sup> HADAWAY, Stuart *The British Airman of the Second World War* (Oxford, Shire Publications, 2013) p.33

The Squadron's first operation using the Beaufort took place on 8 October 1942, in an attack on the Axis supply convoys prior to the major battle of El Alamein. With the end of the campaign in Tunisia in May 1943, the Squadron moved there and re-equipped with the Bristol Beaufighter.

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.

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

Opened at R.A.F. Chivenor in North Devon on 27 November 1940, No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit took on the responsibility for training Beaufort crews in torpedo and bombing sorties from No. 1 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit at R.A.F. Silloth in Cumberland. 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 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. The next day, Flying Officer (F/O) 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 (W/C) 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. A plaintive note in the Operations Record Book on **21 November** records that, *'a party of seventy-seven airmen arrived on posting to his unit today without any previous warning'*.

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 L.4498, L.9905, L.9932, L.9949 and L.9952. 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. Three of these pilots were Polish, who had arrived in the U.K. via France 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. In addition, S/L R. G. YAXLEY of Coastal Command arrived by air in a Mentor 4231 from R.A.F. Northolt to discuss the formation of No. 252 Squadron at R.A.F. Chivenor. Another 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. 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

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.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 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)

Most of the WOp/AGs 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 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.<sup>3</sup>

When not on duty, some men would go swimming at Croyde, the cinema in Braunton, and they would go to dances or drinking in Barnstaple or Ilfracombe. Many men would take a bus into Barnstaple 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 where he woke up.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ALDRIDGE, Arthur with RYAN, Mark *The Last Torpedo Flyers – The True Story of Arthur ALDRIDGE, Hero of the Skies* (London, Simon & Schuster Ltd., 2013)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.

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,
- Drills:
  - Ditching and Dinghy,
  - Parachute,
  - Fire,
  - Crash,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

- 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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. 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.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> See Footnote on Page 3.

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.

During the evening of **23 December**, R.A.F. Chivenor and No. 3 (C) O.T.U. suffered its first fatal air crash. Sergeant (Sgt) James BLATCHFORD, R.A.F.V.R. 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 Thursday evening, Sgt BLATCHFORD took off in Beaufort L.9943, together with Leading Aircraftman (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.<sup>14</sup>

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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 non-commissioned officers (N.C.Os.). Until the end of 1940, the domestic arrangements were complicated by the fact that neither the Officers' nor the Sergeants' messes had been completed, and all the officers and senior N.C.O.s 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. The end of the year saw 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 at the turn of 1941, marked by the opening of the Officers' Mess on **3 January**, 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.

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<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>14</sup> Form 540 ORB November 1940 AIR

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. A flight (or course) comprised twenty-eight men, forming seven crews. 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 Group Captain (G/C) J. H. SADLER from No. 9 Air Crew Selection Board to command R.A.F. Chivenor. 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..

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 **Wednesday, 5 February**, the first notable V.I.P. landed at Chivenor on the B.O.A.C. service, namely Mr. Wendell WILKIE, the U.S.A. envoy. He was received by G/C J. H. SADLER, and they were photographed walking through the snow at R.A.F. Chivenor. After a short stay on the unit, Mr. WILKIE left by air the same day for the United States, via Lisbon, taking off during a heavy snowstorm.

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, 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.<sup>15</sup> The aircraft burst into flames on impact, but 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.<sup>16</sup>

On **Sunday, 23 February**, tragedy came to the base with the death from gunshot wounds of 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.<sup>17</sup> He was promoted to the rank of Pilot Officer, on probation, with effect from 25 May 1940.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 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,

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/rolls/R2094483/> and AIR 28/152

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/34727/page/7500>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/34898/page/4363>

The twenty-five-year-old was a son of Alexander and Eva C. ESPLEN. He was buried in Grave 5587 of Section R Nonconformist, of the Southport (Duke Street) Cemetery.<sup>19</sup>

**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. MUNDY crashed while night flying, with the aircraft bursting into flames, killing the pilot and sole occupant. He was flying Beaufort L.9858, which was one of those delivered from R.A.F. Abbotsinch in January. The aircraft dived into the ground at Braunton Great Field, close to the airfield, for an unknown reason. Herbert MUNDY, who was known as Bob, was a South African from Durban.

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, Braunton were all requisitioned by the Air Ministry to provide this dispersed accommodation.

No. 1 Beaufort Course finished on **2 March**, although the next destination of the aircrew concerned is not recorded. 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, was senior non-commissioned officer and Station Warrant Officer at R.A.F. Chivenor, paraded the funeral party at 14.30 hours at the Station Headquarters, from where the cortege left, with the coffin on a lorry, and a 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.

There was another tragedy on **13 March**, when F/O GRIENTWAITE crashed when flying Blenheim V.6098 en-route to R.A.F. Chivenor. The aircraft was destroyed, killing F/O A. GRIENTHWAITE, 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 **26 March**, a fatal air crash occurred that claimed the lives of Sgt D. O. DRAPER, and Sgt J. A. SIMPSON. They were flying Anson N.9676 over Barnstaple Bay, when their aircraft entered a steep turn at a height of 800' and plunged into the sea. Another pilot from R.A.F. Chivenor witnessed this incident and reported it to base. No trace of the two aircrew was found, so they were reported 'Missing, believed dead'. All was quiet on 27 March, but on **28 March**, the O.T.U. suffered its greatest loss of life in a single incident, when Anson L.9150 crashed into a hillside on Halsinger Down and was burnt out. The pilot was Sgt K. KLYSZCZ, a Polish airman who had escaped from his country when it was invaded. Also killed were four wireless operators under training who were on board.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2700549/ESPLEN,%20MALCOLM%20ALEXANDER>

In addition, on **28 March**, Bristol Beaufort Mk. I L.4498 took off from R.A.F. Chivenor on a solo night flight, as part of his training programme. The aircraft crashed into the sea off North Devon and was lost. The body of the pilot, Sgt F. W. CORDER was never recovered.<sup>20</sup> Although a member of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, Sgt CORDER came from South Africa. On **30 March**, No. 2 Beaufort Course and No. 2 Anson Course both finished on this date. No. 4 Beaufort Course and No. 4 Anson Course both commenced on **31 March 1941**.

On **30 March**, an Air Raid Message Red was in force between 11.55 and 12.20 hours on 30 March, and another Message Red was declared at 20.22 hours on 31 March. This time it was for real, in fact, the Red warning was not received until five minutes after the attack. The two aircraft involved appeared at low altitude over Braunton and attacked the airfield from the south. A He 111 dropped a mixed load of High Explosives and Incendiaries on the airfield and railway line and was followed by a Ju 88 which dropped a similar load of bombs and also opened up on the buildings with machine gun fire. Forty bombs were dropped, of which eleven failed to explode. The only damage to the unit was caused by a bomb which exploded inside a building under construction by the side of the railway line. Three men who were sheltering behind one wall of the building were hit by falling masonry and slightly injured. Because of the low altitude from which they were dropped, most of the unexploded bombs failed to penetrate the surface and were lying on the ground. It was these which caused the greatest hold-up to the activities of the station.

**Tuesday, 15 April 1941**, was a normal day for this period. There was an Air Raid Warning Red alert issued between 02.55 and 04.28 hours. Six Bristol Blenheim aircraft from No. 18 Squadron at R.A.F. Wattisham called at R.A.F. Chivenor before leaving at 13.45 hours on an operational mine laying sortie over France. This was the first operational sortie carried out from R.A.F. Chivenor, albeit with visiting aircraft. Five of them landed on their return from their sortie, refuelled, and then departed for their home base. One Blenheim failed to return, R.3841, which was lost without trace. The pilot was the Commanding Officer of the squadron, W/C C. G. HILL, R.A.F., and the other air crew were F/Sgt J. FRODSHAM, R.A.F.V.R. and F/Sgt C. D. McPHEE, R.A.F., all of whom are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial in Surrey.

R.A.F. Chivenor was attacked again on **16 April** commencing at 03.00 hours. All three runways were rendered unserviceable, and the Gas Clothing Store suffered serious fire damage. The airfield was unserviceable for only a short time after this attack, two runways becoming serviceable again late on 17 April. The main East to West runway was declared serviceable again on 21 April.

## Circumstances of the Crash

Bristol Beaufort, registration serial L.4458, was one of the seventy-three Mark I aircraft delivered to the R.A.F. by the Bristol Aeroplane Company Limited between November 1939 and June 1940.

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<sup>20</sup> HAYWARD Op. Cit. p35.

It was delivered new to No. 22 Squadron and served with that unit operationally and later No. 217 Squadron. It passed to No. 3 (Coastal) Operational Training Unit at R.A.F. Chivenor, arriving on 15 January 1941.<sup>21</sup> On **Friday, 25 April 1941**, L.4458 was being flown by Sgt C. C. N. BAILEY, with his crew of three, plus one other member of air crew, who was an instructor at R.A.F. Chivenor. The crew were:

928619	Sgt C. C. N. BAILEY, R.A.F.V.R.	Pilot & Captain
89589	P/O M. D. YOUNG, R.A.F.V.R.	Observer
840194	Sgt H. R. STILLMAN, R.A.F.V.R.	WOp/AG
919475	Sgt W. A. HUGHES-HUGHES, R.A.F.V.R.	WOp/AG
635790	F/Sgt D. H. PROUDMAN, R.A.F.	WOp/AG (Screened)

The aircraft suffered an engine failure, and crash-landed in the parish of Ashford, near Barnstaple, North Devon.<sup>22</sup> It appears that the scene of the crash was Ash Barton, about one and half miles north of R.A.F. Chivenor. Ash Barton is next to Furze Park Woods, with Luscott Farm nearby.

Albert MANNING farmed at Pippacott Farm, on the opposite side of the valley to Ash Barton. He was working with two of his horses at the farm, when he saw the Beaufort crash into a field opposite his farm. He describes how the aircraft came in at an angle, and impacted the ground, as opposed to sliding along the ground if the angle had been slight. Immediately, he made his way down to the stream at the bottom of the valley, and up to the crash site. The smell of aviation fuel was overwhelming as he reached the aircraft, with the fuel seeping into the ground. Fortunately, there was no fire, otherwise the outcome would have been very different.

Albert MANNING found that most of the air crew were unconscious and went into the wreckage and pulled out the pilot, who he remembers as a large and heavy man. Soon afterwards, R.A.F. personnel arrived at the scene, and the air crew were taken away to hospital. All five were seriously injured. Four of them survived, but the Screened Wireless Operator/Air Gunner (instructor), Douglas PROUDMAN, was critically injured. He died on 27 April 1941, at the North Devon Infirmary in Barnstaple from a fractured skull.

The cause of death was given as: *'Fracture of the base of the skull accidentally and by misadventure sustained through an aeroplane crashing at Furze Park field, Luscott Farm in the parish of Ashford in the county of Devon, on the 25th April 1941. Lived approximately 1 day, 22 1/2 hours, no P.M.'* An inquest was held on 28 July 1941 by S. A. COPP, the then Coroner for the Borough of Barnstaple. F/Sgt PROUDMAN had served previously with No. 248 Squadron, and was probably an instructor at No. 3 (C) O.T.U. He was buried in his hometown of Devizes, Wiltshire.

<sup>21</sup> HAYWARD, Roger *The Beaufort File* (Tonbridge, Air Britain (Historians) Ltd, 1990) p.34.

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.rafcommands.com/archive/00271.php> WATKINS Op. Cit. p.160 gives the location of the crash landing as 15 miles north of Ashburton, in south Devon.

Sgt C. C. N. BAILEY completed his course, and was posted to the Mediterranean, serving with No. 39 Squadron. By now promoted to the rank of Warrant Officer, Clarence Charles Nelson BAILEY (928619) was killed on 10 January 1943, when his Beaufort X.8934 was lost in the eastern Mediterranean. He hailed from South Africa and is commemorated on Column 269 of the Alamein Memorial in Egypt.

## Court of Inquiry

There is no record of a Court of Enquiry being held into this air crash.

## Accidents Investigation Branch

The Accidents Investigation Branch of the Air Ministry are not believed to have investigated this accident.

## The Air Crew

### 928619 Sergeant Clarence Charles Nelson BAILEY, R.A.F.V.R.

Clarence Charles Nelson BAILEY was a South African by birth, the son of Charles Samuel and Clara BAILEY. He was born on 17 October 1914. He arrived at Southampton in the United Kingdom on 25 May 1940, aboard the Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company Ltd passenger ship, Winchester Castle. He gave an address in the U.K. as c/o 56, Berkhamstead Avenue Wembley, Middlesex, and he gave his occupation as a clerk. He enlisted post-September 1939 at R.A.F. Uxbridge, Middlesex, and was granted the service number 928619.

On Sunday, 10 January 1943, Bristol Beaufort Mk. I, X.8934, lifted off from R.A.F. Shallufa in Egypt. This aircraft was one of the twenty-four Mark I Beauforts delivered to the Royal Air Force between March and April 1941. It had served with No. 22 Squadron from 4 May 1941 until 31 December 1941, as L/22. It had been flown safely out to Egypt, via Malta, and was then taken on strength of No. 47 Squadron. The Beauforts were effectively in a pool to be used by any of the maritime strike squadrons then based in the Mediterranean theatre. On the night of 10 January, it was being flown by an air crew from No. 39 Squadron on a night flying exercise over the Delta. The air crew that night were:

776086	F/Sgt D. M. BOON, R.A.F.V.R.	Pilot & Captain
1386277	Sgt J. M. CLARKE, R.A.F.V.R.	Observer
1027508	Sgt R. PAXTON, R.A.F.V.R.	WOp/AG
1262090	Sgt W. RAMSEY, R.A.F.V.R.	WOp/AG

Flight Sergeant BAILEY flew with this air crew on this sortie as a Second Navigator, even though he was still a qualified pilot. He had been posted to No. 39 Squadron, with his air crew, with effect from 20 December 1942, from No. 5 Middle East Training School. It is probable that this was the first posting since his accident back in April 1941.

His family lived at 89, Mountain Road, Woodstock, Cape Town, South Africa. He left effects to the value of £153 10s 9d to his father, a mercantile clerk. At the time of his death, the Operations Record Book (Form 540) of No. 39 Squadron gives his rank as Flight Sergeant, but the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records his rank as Warrant Officer, suggesting his promotion was either posthumous, or had not become known in Egypt at the time of his death. As he has no known grave, he is commemorated on Column 269 of the Alamein Memorial.

#### **89589 Pilot Officer Michael Duncan YOUNG, R.A.F.V.R.**

Michael Duncan YOUNG was born on 21 March 1919. He enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve sometime after January 1937, in order to train as a pilot. At some stage of his training, he was adjudged not to be suitable as a pilot but was remustered as an Observer. He qualified through one of the training schools in the U.K. and on completing his training, he was granted his Observer's brevet and the rank of Sergeant.

He was commissioned on 21 December 1940 (from the rank of Sergeant service number 740877), to the rank of Pilot Officer, on probation, for the duration of hostilities. His seniority dated from 24 November 1940. He was confirmed in his appointment and promoted to the rank of Flying Officer (War Substantive), on 21 December 1941, again with his seniority back-dated to 24 November 1941. On 21 December 1942, he was promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant (War Substantive) in the General Duties Branch, again with his seniority back-dated.

On 21 October 1947, he was transferred to the reconstituted Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, while still retaining the rank of Flight Lieutenant. On 1 March 1951, he regained the rank of Flight Lieutenant in the R.A.F.V.R., having apparently been reduced to the rank of a Flying Officer for a period post-war. He relinquished his commission on 21 October 1952. He died in January 2000, in the Windsor and Maidenhead area of Berkshire, aged eighty years.

#### **749587 Sergeant Herbert Reginald STILLMAN, R.A.F.V.R.**

Herbert Reginald STILLMAN was born on 28 August 1911, at Trowbridge, Wiltshire. He was a twin to his brother, Albert Henry STILLMAN, to their parents, Henry Herbert (1880 – 1952) and Edith Eliza STILLMAN (1882 – 1918). The brothers had two elder sisters, Edith Flora (1904 – 1986) and Winifred Bessie (1908 – 1909), of whom only one was still living at the time of their birth. The family were living at Church Street, Hilperton, Wiltshire, with two boarders called Violet and Rose HARTLEY, aged ten years and six years respectively. Henry's occupation was as a carpenter and joiner.

In December 1915, he enlisted in the British Army, and at the time, stated that the family were living at 17, Upper Broad Street, Conigre, Trowbridge, Wiltshire. He was thirty-five years of age when he enlisted, and he joined The Devonshire Regiment.

On 12 November 1918, Edith STILLMAN died from influenza, which had reached epidemic proportions in the U.K. by the end of the First World War. In December 1919, Henry remarried Rose Hannah BULL (nee FARMER) (1879 – 1945), who had married previously in April 1908. Herbert (and presumably his brother) was baptized on 22 June 1913 in Trowbridge, Wiltshire. It appears he was formally baptized as Reginald Herbert STILLMAN, but transposed his forenames in general use for the rest of his life, although within the family he was known as Reg. His twin brother, who was known by his family as 'Toff', died in December 1931 of pneumonia while serving on H/M Submarine M2 in the Royal Navy. He died in hospital in Melksham, but just five weeks later, the M2 was lost with all hands when it sank off the Dorset coast. Reg gained employment with the Post Office, being awarded his certificate as a Male Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist (Postal) on 1 July 1930. In 1933, he was appointed to a position as a Sorting Clerk at Axminster, Devon.

He married Edith Dorothy SCOTCHBROOK (born 9 September 1914 in British Colombia, Canada) on 2 April 1936 at Heavitree, Exeter, Devon. She also worked for the Post Office, but in Exeter, and in 1939 they were living in a house called 'Clodgy' in Warwick Road, Heavitree, Exeter. They had a daughter called Carol Edith Ann STILLMAN, who was born on 25 November 1937 in Topsham, Devon. Edith remarried Edward Charles CLARKE in 1942 in Leominster, Herefordshire, and Carol was adopted by Edward CLARKE as his daughter.

At some date prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, Herbert STILLMAN joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, and was granted the service number 749587. His service number suggests that he originally wished to become a pilot, but at some stage of his training, he was remustered as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner. On completion of his Wireless Operator and Air Gunner training, he was posted to R.A.F. Chivenor, where he joined up with Sgt BAILEY to form a Beaufort air crew. In the crash of 25 April 1941, Sgt STILLMAN was injured seriously. Like his colleagues, he was taken to the North Devon Infirmary at Barnstaple and was transferred at a later date to a R.A.F. hospital. Like the rest of his colleagues, he suffered head injuries, but STILLMAN also suffered with serious injuries to his legs. He was to have problems with his feet for the rest of his life, and always walked with a limp.

Being non-operational, STILLMAN was reduced to the rank of Aircraftman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class, as his promotion to the rank of Sergeant was only a Temporary appointment. He was not considered fit enough to return to flying duties, but on 11 November 1943, he was commissioned as an Acting Pilot Officer on probation (emergency) in the Administrative and Special Duties Branch of the R.A.F.. He was granted the new service number of 158865. On 30 December 1943, he was regraded as a Pilot Officer, while remaining on probation. On 30 June 1944, he was confirmed in his appointment, and promoted to the rank of Flying Officer, War Substantive. After the end of hostilities, he retained his rank as Flying Officer in the R.A.F.V.R. 29 August 1956

Reg STILLMAN remarried Lucy Maud KEY at Cambridge Registry Office, on 17 August 1942. Their first son, Jeremy John STILLMAN was born at Amesbury, Wiltshire, on 29 October 1944. Sadly, he died in 1947 in Exeter. A second son was born on 12 May 1950, but was either still-born, or died later that same day. He was named Roger STILLMAN. The couple went on to have two other children, which survived into adulthood.

Henry Herbert STILLMAN died in Trowbridge on 15 March 1952, with Lucy STILLMAN dying on 10 April 1997 on Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire. Herbert Reginald STILLMAN died on 21 November 1977, in Forest Row, East Sussex, aged eighty-six years.

#### **919475 Sergeant William Augustus HUGHES-HUGHES, R.A.F.V.R.**

Montague Edward HUGHES-HUGHES was born in Canonbury, London, on 21 December 1853. He married Lydia Margaret ROWE in Toxteth Park, Liverpool, in 1881, and they lived in Islington, London. They had a son, William Montague HUGHES-HUGHES, who was born in 1884 in Kensington, London, and a daughter, Lydia Edith HUGHES-HUGHES, born in 1887. It appears she was named after her mother, who died in January 1887, probably in childbirth.

Montague Edward HUGHES-HUGHES remarried in 1902 to Emily Ida DIXON, in London. Together they had one daughter, Leslie Rosemary HUGHES-HUGHES, who was born in 1905. Emily died in 1910, so he remarried for the second time in June 1914. His new wife was Kathleen (Kate) GORHAM, and they had their first son, Edward Essex HUGHES-HUGHES in 1915, by which time they were living at Leez Priory, Chelmsford, Essex. Montague's eldest son, Captain William Montagu HUGHES-HUGHES, died on 25 September 1915, while serving with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Welsh Regiment.

He had studied at Hertford College, Oxford, where he graduated with a M.A. degree, and was a Barrister-at-Law of the Inner Temple in London. He is buried in Grave I. F. 19. of the Brown's Road Military Cemetery, Festubert, in France.

William Augustus HUGHES-HUGHES was born in the first quarter of 1918, in Chelmsford, Essex, probably at Leez Priory. It appears the family moved back into London by 1928, with Montague Edward HUGHES-HUGHES dying on 14 January 1938, in Bognor Regis, Sussex, aged eighty-four years. Kate died on 16 June 1971 in Maidstone, Kent, aged eighty-three years. William enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve at Uxbridge, Middlesex, sometime after September 1939. He remained in the North Devon Infirmary until he was discharged in July 1941. On his discharge from hospital, Sgt HUGHES-HUGHES resumed flying duties with the R.A.F..

He was posted to No. 22 Squadron at R.A.F. St. Eval in Cornwall. On 8 December 1941, the weather was unsuitable for flying during the day, but two aircraft were despatched during the night to undertake 'Moon Rover' patrols. Both took off at 03.30 hours, on 9 December, F/22 flown by P/O THORNTON, and the other, AW.203, flown by P/O JENKINS.

AW.203 was one of forty-five Mk. I Beauforts delivered by the Bristol Aeroplane Company Ltd. from their factory at Filton to the R.A.F. between April and July 1941. The air crew were:

88040	P/O C. L. JENKINS, R.A.F.V.R.	Pilot & Captain <sup>23</sup>
1164443	Sgt F. G. KIPPS, R.A.F.V.R.	Observer
919475	Sgt W. A. HUGHES-HUGHES, R.A.F.V.R.	WOp/AG
1023594	Sgt T. S. DICKSON, R.A.F.V.R.	WOp/AG

F/22 returned after a short trip, because of the poor conditions. P/O JENKIN's aircraft radioed base to the effect that they would be back early. That was the last message received from the aircraft. The body of Sgt DICKSON was washed ashore at Sennen Cove, close to the Lizard, as were parts of the aircraft. The ORB states: *'which points very much to the fact that he had engine trouble, and made a bold effort to reach land before putting down.'*

F/O Charles Lindsay JENKINS was aged twenty-one years, and was the son of James Thomas and Elizabeth Alice JENKINS, of Rhiwbina, Glamorgan. He is commemorated on Panel 30 of the Runnymede Memorial. He was commissioned (from the rank of Leading Aircraftman 969559) as a Pilot Officer, on probation, for the duration of hostilities on 16 November 1940, but with his seniority dating from 7 November. He was confirmed in his appointment and promoted to the rank of Flying Officer (War Substantive) on 9 November 1941, with his seniority dating from 7 November.

Sgt Francis Gaylor KIPPS was also aged twenty-one years, and was the son of Francis John and Mary KIPPS, of Guildford, Surrey. He is commemorated on Panel 46 of the Runnymede Memorial. Sgt William Augustus HUGHES-HUGHES is commemorated on Panel 45 of the Runnymede Memorial. Sgt Thomas Stewart DICKSON was aged nineteen years, and was the son of John and Helen DICKSON, of Glasgow. As his body was recovered, he is buried in Sec. Q, Grave 246, of the Lambhill Cemetery, Glasgow. All four crew were members of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.

### **635790 Flight Sergeant Douglas Harry PROUDMAN, R.A.F.V.R.**

Douglas Harry PROUDMAN came from Devizes, in Wiltshire, where he was born in the third quarter of 1920. His father, Walter PROUDMAN, was born in Aylestone Park, near Blaby, Leicestershire on 19 May 1891. In 1901, he was living in Stamford Street, Glenfield, Leicestershire with his parents and siblings. In 1911, the family were living at Barkby Thorpe, Leicestershire, where he was employed as a stockman. It appears that he emigrated to Canada prior to the Great War, as he served in the Canadian Army during that war. In the second quarter of 1916, Walter married Elsie Florence Overton SMITH in Devizes, Wiltshire, and they settled in Devizes after the war. He died on 8 October 1980, when he was living at 12, Pans Lane, Devizes, and left an estate of £27,273, but it appears he had no beneficiaries.

<sup>23</sup> The Form 540 Operations Record Book for No. 22 Squadron refers to JENKINS in the rank of P/O, although he had been promoted to the rank of F/O on 9 November 1941. It is probably another case of the Squadron not being aware of a promotion, or the ORB not 'catching up' with promotions.

Elsie was Mayor of Devizes in 1956 and was awarded the British Empire Medal in 1965 for her service with the Women's Voluntary Service. She died on 5 May 1922, at Mayfield Nursing Home, Nunsteed Road, Devizes.

Douglas Harry enlisted in the Royal Air Force in February 1939, as an Aircraftman. He remustered as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, and on completion of his training, he served with No. 248 Squadron. This was a Blenheim equipped fighter squadron, based in the U.K.. On completion of his tour, he was posted to R.A.F. Chivenor as an Instructor. The body of F/Sgt PROUDMAN was taken to his hometown of Devizes, where he was buried in the town's cemetery.

## Conclusions

The death of F/Sgt PROUDMAN was a sad and tragic event for his family and friends, but simply another incident in the tumult of wartime. It was particularly poignant as F/Sgt PROUDMAN was an instructor having completed an operational tour safely. Although the details are sketchy, it is possible that as he was travelling as an additional person to the usual crew of four, F/Sgt PROUDMAN was unable to brace himself against the impact as the aircraft crash landed.

This incident also highlights the differing standards of record keeping, and the need for a historian to use as many primary sources as possible. It is not known why this air crash, and the death of F/Sgt PROUDMAN, is not recorded in the Operations Record Book for R.A.F. Chivenor. Likewise, some secondary sources refer to the location of this air crash as Ashburton, in South Devon, or confuse it with the loss of Beaufort L.9933 and the death of Sgt MORRISON.

At least it is now recorded for posterity, and the death of F/Sgt PROUDMAN will not be overlooked in the future.

## In Memoriam

27 April 1941 – Bristol Beaufort Mk. I – L.4458

No.	Surname	Forenames(s)	Age	Date of Death	Rank	Role	Service	Service Number	Place of Burial	Grave
1.	PROUDMAN <sup>24</sup>	Douglas Harry	20	27/04/41	Flight Sergeant	WOp/AG	R.A.F.	635790	Devizes Cemetery	Sec. N.C. Grave 94.

<sup>24</sup> Son of Walter and Elsie PROUDMAN, of Devizes, Wiltshire. Had served previously with No. 248 Squadron but is shown as posted to No. 3 (C) O.T.U. in the Grave Registration Certificate (see C.W.G.C. website). See: <http://www.rafcommands.com/forum/showthread.php?15037-F-Sgt-%28WOP-AG%29-Douglas-Harry-Proudman-635790>

## 09 December 1941 – Bristol Beaufort Mk. I – AW.203 F/22

No.	Surname	Forenames(s)	Age	Date of Death	Rank	Role	Service	Service Number	Place of Burial or Memorial	Grave or Panel
1.	JENKINS <sup>25</sup>	Charles Lindsay	21	09/12/41	Pilot Officer	Pilot & Captain	R.A.F.V.R.	88040	Runnymede Memorial	Panel 30.
2.	KIPPS <sup>26</sup>	Francis Gaylor	21	09/12/41	Sergeant	Observer	R.A.F.V.R.	1164443	Runnymede Memorial	Panel 46.
3.	HUGHES-HUGHES	William Augustus		09/12/41	Sergeant	WOp/AG	R.A.F.V.R.	919475	Runnymede Memorial	Panel 45
4.	DICKSON <sup>27</sup>	Thomas Stewart	19	09/12/41	Sergeant	WOp/AG	R.A.F.V.R.	1023594	Lambhill Cemetery	Sec. Q. Grave 246.

<sup>25</sup> Son of James Thomas and Elizabeth Alice JENKINS, of Rhiwbina, Glamorgan.

<sup>26</sup> Son of Francis John and Mary KIPPS, of Guildford, Surrey.

<sup>27</sup> Son of John and Helen DICKSON, of Glasgow.

## 10 January 1943 – Bristol Beaufort Mk. I – X.8934

No.	Surname	Forenames(s)	Age	Date of Death	Rank	Role	Service	Service Number	Memorial	Column
1.	BOON <sup>28</sup>	Denis Murdock	24	10/01/43	Flight Sergeant	Pilot & Captain	R.A.F.V.R.	776086	Alamein Memorial	Column 269
2.	CLARKE	Jack Mortimor		10/01/43	Sergeant	Observer	R.A.F.V.R.	1386277	Alamein Memorial	Column 270.
3.	PAXTON <sup>29</sup>	Robert	26	10/01/43	Sergeant	WOp/AG	R.A.F.V.R.	1027508	Alamein Memorial	Column 271.
4.	RAMSEY <sup>30</sup>	William	28	10/01/43	Sergeant	WOp/AG	R.A.F.V.R.	1262090	Alamein Memorial	Column 271.
5.	BAILEY <sup>31</sup>	Clarence Charles Nelson	28	10/01/43	Warrant Officer	Pilot (2 <sup>nd</sup> Observer)	R.A.F.V.R.	928619	Alamein Memorial	Column 269

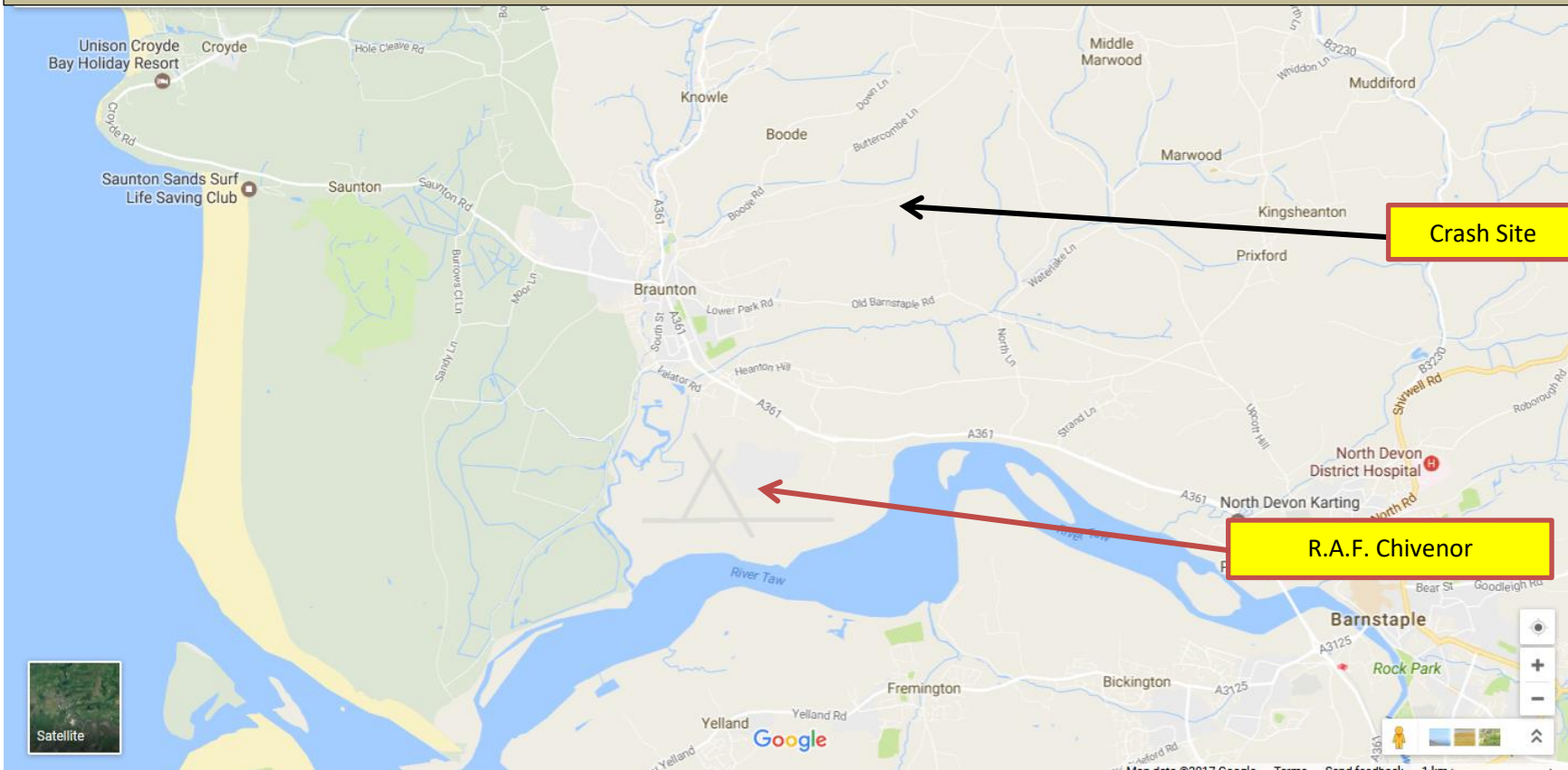
<sup>28</sup> Son of Charles Henry Murdoch and Kate BOON; husband of Rene Verna BOON.

<sup>29</sup> Son of Robert Leadbetter and Christina Jane Crawford PAXTON, of Dumbarton, Dumbartonshire.

<sup>30</sup> Son of William and Caroline RAMSEY, of Thornton Heath, Surrey.

<sup>31</sup> Son of Charles Samuel and Clara BAILEY of Woodstock, Cape Town, South Africa. The Form 541 O.R.B. for No. 39 Squadron shows him as a Flight Sergeant.

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



Map of the crash site of L.4458 – 25 April 1941





*Left – The scene of the crash of L.4458 near Ash Barton. The aircraft came down in the field just to the right of the wind turbine in the centre foreground of the picture.*

*The Author 2017*

*Right – The Grave of F/Sgt PROUDMAN in Devizes Cemetery*

*Courtesy of <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/59789424/douglas-harry-proudman>*



*Above – Herbert Reginald STILLMAN as a Flight Lieutenant, post-war.*

*Courtesy of: Ancestry.co.uk*

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