Inquest Opened on Aircrash Victims

2 Jan. 1959

The inquest was opened at Christchurch hospital, on Monday, on the nine B.O.A.C. employees killed on Christmas Eve when a Britannia aircraft crashed and caught fire at Sopley Park, Winkton, while on a crew training flight.
After medical and identification evidence had been given, the Southampton County Coroner, Mr. D. H. B. Harfield, adjourned the inquest until Tuesday, January 27.
Present at the inquest was Mr. Kenneth Staple, secretary of B.O.A.C., to represent the Corporation, and two other members of the staff of B.O.A.C. were present to give evidence of identification.

SINCERE SYMPATHY

On behalf of the Board of Management and staff of B.O.A.C., Mr. Staple expressed "very sincere sympathy with the relatives of those who lost their lives in this unfortunate accident".
One of the three survivors was John Buckley (42) Engineer Officer, of Stanpit, Christchurch. The other two were First Officer Keith Myers (27) of Harrow, and Edmund O'Keefe (35), of Wokingham, Berks.
They were not fit enough to attend the opening of the inquest but it was stated at Boscombe Hospital that they were "progressing satisfactorily".

KILLED

The inquest was on Capt. John Edwin Jackson (48), pilot, of Wraysbury; Cecil David Woodhouse (36), engineer officer, of Wokingham; Leslie James Harrison (37), instrument inspector, of Sunbury; John Cecil Silberry (30), aircraft greaser, of Hampton; Peter Sven Jenson (20), apprentice aircraft electrician, of Egham; Stanley Kierkowski (50), instrument mechanic, of Putney; Frank Phillip Stedman (42), aircraft electrician, of Surbiton; Edmund John Jones (41), airframe fitter, of Stanwell; Alfred Charles Waterworth Hamilton, progress assistant, of Laleham.
The Britannia, which took off from London Airport, crashed at about 12.15 p.m. after local residents had heard an explosion.

HIT CABLES

Mr. Leonard Witt, of The Shack, Burley Road, Winkton, ran out of his garage and saw the aircraft hit some high tension cables and there was a big flash as the plane burst into flames.
It skimmed Burley Road, ploughed through the hedge, uprooting trees and bushes, and skidded nearly 300 yards before smashing into a copse in Sopley Park and disintegrating.
Sopley Park School, which is about a quarter of a mile from the scene of the crash, was in a direct line of the path of the aircraft.

HELPED IN RESCUE

Local residents rushed to the scene to help in the rescue operations. Some of the first to arrive were Mr. Joe Ottewill, of Winkton Garage, Mr. Errol Nott, of the Plaish House Hotel, Winkton, and Mr. Frederick Morris, farm labourer, of West Road, Bransgore.
Mr. Norris received head injuries when a branch of a tree fell on him while he was helping firemen. He was taken to Boscombe hospital but not detained.
Mr. Alfred Burrows, of Bransgore, had a narrow escape as he was cycling along the Burley Road. The plane skimmed over his head as it plunged to earth.
Other residents directed traffic on the main road while firemen cleared telephone wires which had been brought down by the aircraft.
Ambulances and fire brigades from many parts of Hampshire and members of the local police were soon on the scene.

TRACTORS HELPED

Tractors had to be used to tow ambulances and fire appliances through the mud and on one occasion firemen and other rescuers had to take cover when flames reached the giant fuel tanks in part of the aircraft's wing.
The park was strewn with debris and three heifers were killed as the aircraft ploughed through the field.
Sir Gerald d'Erlanger, chairman of B.O.A.C., visited the survivors in Boscombe Hospital on Saturday and throughput the weekend experts of the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation continued their investigation into the causes of the crash.

Pilot's Error Caused Britannia Crash Says Ministry Report

Christchurch Times June 24,1960

A BRITANNIA airliner crash, near Winkton on Christmas Eve, 1958, was due to the pilot mistaking the plane's height by 10,000ft., says a Ministry of Aviation report issued this week.
The pilot, Captain John Jackson, 46, of Wraysbury, Bucks., who died in the crash, is held responsible for the disaster. The report says he misread or failed to read his altimeter, the instrument which shows a plane's height above ground.
The Britannia had been on a test flight from London airport. On board, besides the pilot and first officer, were ten other crewmen and technicians employed by the British Overseas Airways Corporation. Only three on board survived the crash.
The report says although "the responsibility for the accident must rest with the captain," the inquiry learn found that the aircraft's altimeter was such that "a higher degree of attention was required to interpret it accurately than is desirable in so vital an instrument," and this was a "contributory factor.'
It adds: "Capt. Jackson misread or failed to read the indicated altitude, and that the first officer, Keith Myers misread his altimeter by about 10,000ft. too high when reporting the aircraft's altitude to air traffic control five minutes before the crash.
"The first officers' altimeter may have been subject to some inaccuracy, but any such inaccuracy had no bearing on the cause of the accident," the report states.
Replying to the findings in the report, the British Airlines Pilots' Association, stated: "The accident cannot justifiably be ascribed to a failure by the pilot and first officer to properly carry out their duties." The association's statement also referred to various cases of "ambiguities" shown in altimeters of the type fitted to the crashed Britannia.

Internet Report

Weather conditions

On 24 December 1958, much of the south of England was covered in thick fog making travel by any means hazardous. Many aircraft had to be diverted as visibility was below the minimum permissible distance at most of the airports on the south coast. To a pilot who was less than aware of the conditions on the ground and the altitude at which they were flying, this fog would have an appearance very similar to normal cloud cover. For the pilots of G-AOVD this may have added to the illusion that they were at a much higher altitude and that they were reading the instruments correctly.

Accident sequence

The aircraft departed London Heathrow Airport at 10:10 am on a test flight to renew its certificate of airworthiness with 12 persons aboard including 5 crew. After completing the test, at approximately 11:55 am, the crew requested clearance to descend from 12,000 feet to 3,000 feet for approach to Hurn Airport, possibly as an alternate destination due to poor weather at Heathrow. Approximately 3 minutes later, at 11:58 am, Hurn Airport lost contact with the aircraft as it struck the ground, crossing a road into a ploughed field, bringing down telephone lines and trees and alerting residents in the nearby villages. Upon realising they had lost contact with the aircraft, the controller at Hurn contacted the emergency services giving the last known position before contact was lost. Likewise the residents of Winkton, Sopley, and people living near Bransgore contacted emergency services saying they believed that they had heard the sound of a low flying plane accompanied with the sound of a crash.

Emergency response and rescue of survivors

At approximately midday the members of the volunteer fire service in Burley and Christchurch were alerted by way of an air raid siren, calling them to the station to respond to the report of the crash. The initial report from Hurn Airport stated that they were unaware of the type of aircraft involved or how many passengers were being carried, and that they believed the aircraft was to the north of the airport when it crashed. However, on receiving updated information on the reports from Winkton and Sopley the fire crews decided to start the search for the aircraft in that area.

The fire service searching in Winkton discovered the location of the wreckage after travelling a short distance along the Burley Road and finding telephone poles and cables which had been broken and dragged into a field off the road. A foot search was mounted and eventually the crew spotted some broken trees along with aircraft debris and a fire. The crew chief sent a message to fire control to confirm the location of the crash and set up a rendezvous at a local public house to give emergency services a positive location. Another appliance which had been sent to Sopley to search there was unable to be contacted as it was not fitted with a radio; fortunately, however, its crew came across other appliances heading the other way to the incident, and were then informed of the location.

Another hindrance to the emergency effort was the lack of a four-wheel drive appliance which meant that the firemen had to attempt to drive an 8 ton vehicle over a ploughed field which added delay to the rescue and was only accomplished with a lot of effort. While this was going on, the crew chief and some of the crew from the first appliance on the scene continued to search on foot and eventually found the remains of the cockpit with the injured co-pilot trapped inside. They began to cut him free and as further emergency services arrived on the scene, a co-ordinated search and rescue effort was mounted over the site, fanning out and finding a further two survivors. The fire station was eventually able to confirm what aircraft had been involved and the number of people on board at the time. Having received this information the emergency services were able to account for all the people involved and to continue putting out the fires.

Investigation

The crash was attributed to a failure on the part of the Captain and First Officer to correctly establish the altitude of the aircraft before and during the descent. The Britannia aircraft was fitted with a 3-handed altimeter which required a higher degree of concentration to read correctly than was desirable. The crew misread the instrument believing that they were at 11,500 feet when they began descending, when in fact they were only at 1,500 feet. As a result they flew the aircraft into the ground which was obscured

by fog at the time. The type of flight in which the aircraft was engaged was also thought to be a contributing factor.

It was concluded that this crash was a type known as Controlled Flight into Terrain (CFIT) and that there were no defects with the aircraft or its systems which contributed to the crash. For this the failure to read the instruments correctly rests with the captain. This was not the first crash involving a crew misreading this type of altimeter in this long distance, high altitude aircraft. As a direct result of this and other similar incidents, altimeters would now be required to display a cross-hatch or chequered flag when indicating an altitude below 1500 feet. Furthermore, all fire appliances in Christchurch would now be fitted with radios for improved communication, and when four-wheel drive appliances became available, Christchurch was one of the first rural stations to be allocated one.