

TRAGEDY AT MOUNT BATTEN

Flying boats played an important role between the Wars, particularly in the late 1920s and the 1930s, in defending British interests in the Middle East, India and the Far East as well as patrolling the Western Approaches. Their long distance capability was well illustrated by four RAF Supermarine Southampton flying boats which left Plymouth in October 1927, flying to Singapore, round the Australian continent, on to Japan and back to Singapore, a round trip of 23,000 miles with 29 refuelling stops.

Mount Batten had been an important sea plane base during the final 18 months of the First World War. It was subsequently placed on a care and maintenance basis though with the long term intention of reopening it as a permanent flying boat station. The legal formalities were finally completed by 1925 and the base was reopened as RAF Cattewater (though often known as Mount Batten) on 22 August 1928. The following February Aircraftman T E Shaw (the legendary Lawrence of Arabia) was posted to RAF Cattewater and remained there for four years.

In January 1930 No 209 (FB) Squadron was reformed at Mount Batten with eight flying boats, of which three were Blackburn Iris Mark 111 and five Supermarine Southamptons which were the more common type of flying boat in service at the time.

On the morning of Wednesday 4 February 1931 Blackburn Iris No N238 took off from Mount Batten on an Air Defence training exercise in conjunction with fighter aircraft from Roborough. On coming in to land at Batten Bay in a glide and not under engine power, with Wing Commander Charles Tucker at the controls, the aircraft instead of following a gently declining angle of descent nose-dived straight into the water at an estimated 70 mph, its angle of descent unchanged. The weather was fine, the surface of the sea like glass and there was no mechanical fault in the plane. The cause of the accident appears to have been pilot error. The Court of Inquiry revealed that Wing Commander Tucker, although a qualified pilot, was not proficient in piloting flying boats. It appears that he had taken over the controls from Pilot Officer Frederick Kingsley Wood.

Two fishermen were first on the scene and saved two of the crew. They were followed by the Station Commander, Wing Commander Sydney Smith, and T E Lawrence in a RAF launch who saved two more.

Of the twelve on board eight had perished. Pilot Officer Wood was among those saved but he died from his injuries the same afternoon. Two other bodies were recovered, namely those of Leading Aircraftman William Sydney Rutledge and Wing Commander Tucker. The remaining six were never recovered.

The funeral of Flying Officer Wood and Leading Aircraftman Rutledge took place on 10 February, the body of Wing Commander Tucker being diverted from the funeral procession to Plymouth North Road Station from where it was conveyed to Loughborough for burial. The funeral procession which started from the Royal Naval Hospital was an impressive and solemn affair, reminiscent of the scale of the funeral procession of the crew of HM Submarine A8 nearly 26 years earlier. Thousands lined the streets. A 1½ minute sequence of the procession on the Pathé News website gives a good indication of its scale. The procession proceeded to Ford Park Cemetery

where the two crew members were buried in unmarked graves, one behind the other. The mourners were so numerous that the burial service was held at the graveside.

Little is known of LAC Rutledge. Flying Officer Wood was a South African by birth but educated in England and at the date of his death his father was living in Bulawayo, Rhodesia. His brother, W H Wood, was captain of Devonport Services RFC, and Wood had played for the Club at Bath as recently as the previous Saturday. He had gained the reputation of being a consistently good forward.

It has always seemed wrong to the Trustees of Ford Park Cemetery Trust that the two airmen should lie in unmarked graves. The Trust therefore approached the Commonwealth War Graves Commission who generously donated a single blank non-war (ie with shoulders) Portland stone marker with the RAF badge inscribed on it. Martin and Son has inscribed the marker free of charge. And the Trust, using its own mason, has combined the two graves into one long grave with the Portland stone marker at the head. It is hoped to rededicate the grave on Monday 4 February, the 77th anniversary of the tragedy.

HAW

22.11.2007

Acknowledgements

Gerald Wasley *Mount Batten. The Flying Boats of Plymouth*
Gerald Wasley 2006

Various contemporary press cuttings

The Naval and Military Record 11 February 1931

Pat Luxford and her team of volunteer researchers

Curator, RAF Museum, Hendon, London

Air Historical Branch, RAF

Royal Air Force, Personnel Management Agency, Casualties Section

Rod Pickles