

THE AEROPLANE DISASTER

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BODIES REMOVED AT BIRCHINGTON

INQUEST ADJOURNED UNTIL JUNE

The bodies of the two airmen, who were reported missing after the aeroplane disaster at Birchington last week, have since been washed ashore by the tide. That of Air-Mechanic Ernest Edward Mills, aged twenty, of Cornwall, was found on the sands on Wednesday morning, eight days after the plane crashed into the sea [*found on 16th April – crash on April 7th*] and near to the scene of the tragedy. The body of Pilot Officer Neil Coull Walker, aged nineteen, of Lee-on-Solent, was given up by the sea close to the same spot during the early hours of Thursday morning.

The inquest was opened at The New Inn, Birchington [*The Pewter Pot after 1961*] on Thursday morning by the Coroner for the Cinque Ports¹ (Mr N. T. Lambert) who sat with a jury. The foreman was Mr Charles Solly.

The Coroner said that he was afraid that he could do no more at that enquiry than take evidence of identification. The principal witnesses were in the hospital and were not likely to be able to appear for several weeks. Under the circumstances, though he regretted to bind over the Jury for so long a period, he had no alternative.

Enquiry was first made regarding the death of Aircraftsman Mills. Roy Algernon Mills, builder of Torquay, said that the deceased was his brother, whose home was at **St Anne's Chapel, Gunnislake, Cornwall**. He last saw his brother about twelve months ago when he was on leave.

Squadron-Leader Darcy Power, RAF said that he had examined the body of the deceased on the 15th instant. He found no external injuries which were likely to cause death, and his opinion was that death had occurred from drowning.

Albert Thomas Reed, labourer, Birchington, said that on the previous morning at 9.30 he saw lying on the beach at the edge of the water, what he at first took to be a barrel. On going towards it, he found it was the body of an airman and he gave information to the police.

The coroner then proceeded to take evidence relating to the death of Flying-Officer Walker.

Flying-Officer Leslie Gordon Nixon, RAF Manston, said that the deceased joined the squadron for instruction and he last saw him at the 7.50 a.m. station parade on the morning of the crash. The deceased then appeared to be in his usual state of health. He had seen the body in the mortuary and identified it as that of the deceased officer.

Squadron-Leader Darcy Power said that he had examined the body of the deceased that morning and had found a deep incised wound four inches long on the right side of his neck. The wound was made before death, but whether the officer died from the effects of it or whether he died from

¹ Birchington, as a Limb of Dover, was under the Port for all matters of law & order until 1935

drowning, he could not say. It was a sharp, clean cut such as might have been made by a sharp piece of metal. Witness went on to say that it would probably be six weeks before the two injured airmen who were now in hospital, would be able to attend as witnesses.

After consulting with the jury, the Coroner said that he would adjourn the inquest till three p.m. on Thursday, June 25th. It would be necessary for him to have the evidence of the injured officer and aircraftsman, and if their evidence was not satisfactory, he might have still further to adjourn it, that is if there was anything wrong with the machine or anything of that sort. He did not wish to have the trouble they had over at Croydon recently. The machine may have been in perfect order, but he would like to have an officer from Manston present at the resumed enquiry.

Flight-Lieutenant V. R. Gibbs, 9th Squadron RAF was appointed to be present.

The foreman of the Jury said that he and the other members of the Jury wished to record their sympathy with the relatives and friends of the deceased airmen in their sad bereavement through the unfortunate accident.

The corner expressed the feeling of the Jury to Mr Mills, who, with deep emotion, replied "Thank you very much, sir."

AN EYE WITNESS'S STORY

In reference to the aeroplane disaster at Birchington, a correspondent writes, "It was unfortunate that no boat was available at the Beresford Gap, as, had one been there, much valuable time would have been saved and possibly also the lives of Pilot-Officer Walker and Aircraftsman Mills. As it was helpers had to go some distance to obtain boats and to reach the scene of the disaster, all of which caused an unavoidable delay in effecting the rescue. The first boat to arrive was brought from Grenham Bay and was followed immediately by the second boat, manned by Mr Brockman and a man known locally as 'Paddy'. This second boat had to be rowed from Minnis Bay, quite a considerable distance away, and those in charge made a great and strenuous effort to render their assistance. Hearing the crash of the aeroplane, Flying-Officer Wilson and his two younger brothers rushed to the cliffs at Grenham Bay. On realising that the aeroplane was in the sea and the crew in distress, they set out to obtain a private boat stowed away in a garage of a local resident. This was dragged along the cliffs for a distance of a quarter of a mile and lowered with the help of willing hands down the Gap with steep steps at Grenham Bay, where it was manned with one long and one short oar by Flying-Officer Wilson and Mr Hugh Mitchell. There was some difficulty in locating the wreck, owing to the density of the fog, and before taking Pilot-Officer Bushell off [*from the wreck*] a search was made to ascertain whether any members of the crew were entangled in the wreckage. The second boat had then arrived and took off the remaining survivor. The wrecked aeroplane was subsequently brought inshore, in order to facilitate the work of the Manston mechanics on their arrival. Flying-Officer J. B. Wilson, attached to the Naval wing of the Royal Air Force, served on HMS Argos during the recent cruise of the Atlantic Fleet, and also belongs to the Old Boys of Herne Bay College [and] is familiarly known as 'Pat' Wilson. Mr Hugh Mitchell is the well-known junior championship amateur golfer."