

BIRCHINGTON AEROPLANE DISASTER

THE RESUMED HEARING

“I AM PERFECTLY SATISFIED” – THE CORONER

Gazette – Friday 25th June 1925

The Inquest touching the death of **Flight-Officer Neil Coull Walker** and **Air-Mechanic Ernest Edward Mills** of the Royal Air Force, Manston in the recent aeroplane disaster at Birchington, was resumed on Thursday [24th April] at the New Inn, Birchington. The hearing had been adjourned from April 16th to permit of evidence being given by the principal witnesses, who were then in hospital suffering from injuries sustained in the crash.

It will be recalled that the disaster occurred on Tuesday April 7th 1925, a large modern machine of the Vickers Virginia type colliding with a fog-bank (!) and crashing into the sea. Two of the four occupants were rescued. On Wednesday of the following week, the body of Air-Mechanic Mills (who was aged twenty and whose home was at Gunnislake, Cornwall) was found on the sands at Birchington, washed ashore by the tide. The body of Pilot-Officer Walker, (aged nineteen of Lee-on-Solent) was given up by the sea close to the same spot on the following morning.

The Coroner for Dover and its Liberties (Mr E. T. Lambert) conducted the hearing sitting with a jury, of whom Mr Charles Solly was the foreman.

Pilot-Officer Alec Bushell, attached to the 9th Squadron Royal Air Force, Manston, deposed to being in charge of the aeroplane in question on April 7th. He made the usual examination of the plane before he ascended. Going up from the Aerodrome, he drove the machine in the direction of the marshes. He had been flying about ten minutes when he entered a dense fog. He tried to glide below it and hit the sea. He had no idea he was so low. He had an idea he was somewhere near the coast at Birchington.

Coroner: “Was there anything whatever wrong with the machinery?”

Witness: “No.”

C: “And anything that happened was entirely due to the fog?”

W: “Yes.”

C: “Did you see the deceased men after you hit the sea?”

W: “I saw both of them and spoke to them. Mills was a bit shaky. Walker said he was all right.”

Further questioned by the Coroner, witness said he did not know anything about Pilot-Officer Walker’s injury. He himself was all right until, overcome by petrol fumes, he tried to rise and lost consciousness for a few minutes. When he recovered, he did not see either Pilot-Officer Walker or Air-Mechanic Mills. They had disappeared.

The foreman of the Jury: “You say the officer was quite all right, yet I think he was the one who had this severe mark on the neck.”

The Coroner: “That may have come afterwards.”

A jurymen advanced the theory that the stays of the rigging [*which were as sharp as cheese-cutters*] would have been capable of cutting a man to the extent of Pilot-Officer Walker’s wound, of which evidence was given when the inquest opened. Replying to questions put to him by Mr A. C. Walker, father of the deceased officer, witness said that when he left the Aerodrome the visibility was about two miles on the ground and about 700 feet in the air from the ground. There was no wind.

Mr Walker: “What were your instructions on leaving the Aerodrome?”

Witness: "I was told to practise turns near the Aerodrome."

Mr Walker: "Did you exceed your instructions in any way?"

Witness: "Well, I don't think I did. No - because you can't keep absolutely over the Aerodrome when doing turns.

Mr Walker: "You were told to keep clear of the fog perhaps?"

Witness: "We didn't know there was any dense fog."

Mr Walker: "Had you any instructions as to what to do when lost in fog?"

Witness: "No Instructions. I have always been told to go down, but there were no standing orders."

In further reply to Mr Walker's questions, witness said the machine was not in wireless communication with the ground. In April, witness had had seventeen months service in the Royal Air Force and about thirty-five hours flying experience with a Vickers Virginia machine. He had had no previous accidents. At the time of the accident he was gliding down. The reading of his altimeter was 700 feet, when he shut off the engine and when he noticed the reading it was 200 feet. Not very long after that the aeroplane crashed. The indicator of the altimeter usually lagged by so many feet. It did not follow the ascent or descent quickly enough.

The Coroner: "It does not indicate quite accurately the distance of descent. Is that right?"

Witness: "And ascent. Yes."

Mr Walker: "Did you take any other precautions to avoid the sea or ground?"

Witness: "I don't think there were any other precautions I could take."

Mr Walker: "And knowing, as you do now, the danger, would you, in future, repeat such a descent?"

Witness: "I think if I was in the fog again, I should not go down. I should go up." Witness added that there were no lifebelts carried because the flight was not expected to be over the sea. It was very difficult to follow the turn indicator in a fog.

By the Jury: "He could have got out of the difficulty by going towards Canterbury."

A Juryman: "Would it not have been possible to have found out there was too much fog before going up? By communication, for instance, with the North Foreland [lighthouse]? It was slightly foggy everywhere that morning."

Mr Walker: He was merely told to go up.

Witness subsequently expressed a wish to withdraw his answer to a previous question as to what he would do if repeating a flight in a fog. He said he would rather not answer any questions as to that.

Mr Walker called the coroner's attention to the trend of his questions to witness, which showed, he said, that the officer was not so much to blame as those who sent him up. They had given him a very difficult task to do to keep out of the fog.

In reply, to Flight-Lieutenant V. R. Gibbs, who represented the Aerodrome in an official capacity, witness said he had flown in the identical machine in worse weather conditions and fog than prevailed on the day of the accident, and in one case he flew from Brooklands to Manston in fog in the same machine. He had been in possession for some time, of his general service pilot's certificate.

Replying to a juryman, Flight-Lieutenant Gibbs said the machine that crashed had been at Manston about a month.

The Foreman of the Jury (to witness): "I hope you will not imply we have attached any blame to you. We congratulate you on what you did, I think."

Eustace **Grellis** [*this was spelt **Grennlis** in the earlier reports*], Aircraftsman Second-class, said he had heard the evidence of Pilot-Officer Bushell and could confirm

it in detail, except that he did not see Pilot-Officer Walker after hitting the sea. He (the witness) was injured and lost consciousness for a few minutes. He had examined the machine before it started and found it all quite clear.

Replying to Mr Walker, the witness said that Pilot-Officer Bushell had not a reputation for reckless flying.

By the Coroner: "He did not know how he received the cuts on his face, and did not know how the other man got them similarly."

Pilot-Officer Bushell, recalled, said he did not agree that the machine was upside down. They were all thrown clear of it when it hit the sea and came up to the surface at different places. Witness came up to the plane with Grellis and Walker.¹

The Coroner intimated to the Jury that he was perfectly satisfied with the evidence, and thought there had been no reflection on anyone at all.

The Jury returned a verdict of "Death from misadventure" in both cases, Air-Mechanic Mills from drowning and Pilot-Officer Bushell [*this should read **Walker***] in accordance with the medical evidence.



¹ The Vickers Virginia had an open cockpit, and there were no seat-belts at that time.