

# AEROPLANE DISASTER AT BIRCHINGTON

Report in Gazette issue of Friday 11<sup>th</sup> April 1925

## FEARED LOSS OF TWO LIVES TWO SURVIVORS' GRAPHIC STORY OF RESCUE

A tragedy that has cast gloom over the whole of Birchington occurred on Tuesday morning [7<sup>th</sup> April] a short distance seaward from the cliffs of that peaceful village. In the mist that enveloped the sea, a large aeroplane crashed downward, and was lost to sight. Here, out in the calm, placid waters, in the thickness of the mist - so near, and yet so far from safety - four men struggled from within and beneath the wreckage and, with the helping hand of each other, clambered to points of vantage. Apparently at one time all the four men were on top of the machine out of reach of the sea, and each shared equally the possibility of rescue. However, only two were saved and, from the story of one of the survivors, the disappearance of their companions is a mystery.

The aeroplane, a large bombing machine of a recent type known as Vickers Virginia, had been stationed on the aerodrome at Manston. Manned by a pilot, a brother officer and two mechanics, it left the Royal Air Force centre on Tuesday morning for a local flight. Prior to the mishap it was seen flying over Margate, and it is further stated that it landed for a short while in a field not far from Birchington. It is believed that when the machine dipped into the mist and turned on its side in the sea, engine trouble had enforced the pilot to make an attempt to land. From subsequent investigations it is stated the starboard motor of the plane was found to be out of action. The plane struck the sea about a quarter of a mile out from the Beresford Gap and to this miniature bay it was afterwards towed by motor boats. The work of rescue and salvage occupied a number of hours, but the worst fears were entertained for the missing men, one an officer and the other an aircraftsman. A sad feature of the case is the fact that the officer, a young man, had only joined the staff at the Aerodrome two or three days previously, being fresh from his training college.

### THE PLANE'S CREW

The missing men are Flying Officer Peter [*should read Neil*] Walker and Aircraftsman Mills. The survivors are Flying Officer Bushell (the pilot) and Aircraftsman Glennis [*this should read Grellis*]. Each of the latter are severely injured, the pilot sustaining hurt to his head and leg and Grennlis severe crushing of the face and chest.

The discovery of the accident was made by Ashley Millen, an electrician employed at the Beresford Hotel, who, while on the cliff-top, heard the plane overhead, flying low and going in the direction of Ingoldsby, eventually turning out to sea. By the sound of the machine, there seemed to him to be engine

trouble. He states that at the time he thought the plane would hit something. He then heard the crash. At first he thought the machine had collided with the cliffs. Taking off his boots, he waded out in shallow water a considerable distance, going out until he was waist deep. Wading for about twenty minutes, he was still unable to see anything owing to the mist. He shouted several times and eventually he received a reply to his question, "Are you safe?" The reply was, "No". Thereupon, Mr Millen, together with a fellow employee at the hotel named Burge, obtained a motor cycle and rode to Minnis Bay. Simultaneous with their arrival for the purposes of putting out a boat, two other boats were being launched, one by Mr Brockman and a companion known as Paddy and the other by a Mr Wilson. After several minutes, states Mr Millen, the two survivors were landed at the Gap, one in each of the two boats. Stretcher bearers were at hand and the rescued airmen were soon conveyed to the Beresford Hotel. Here everything possible was done and a Royal Air Force surgeon attended them.

The crash took place about fifteen minutes past eleven. Motor boats arrived on the scene some time afterwards and, following a thorough search for the missing men, howbeit unsuccessful, the plane was towed inshore towards the Gap. Here the work of salvage proceeded apace, large tenders for haulage material coming from the Aerodrome, together with a column of mechanics.

### **SWIMMING TO THE RESCUE**

Shortly after the alarm of the accident was given, a young employee of the Beresford Hotel, by name Billy James and Dr Flodd, who was in the neighbourhood, each made a plucky attempt to swim out to the plane. Each had to give up his attempt for the reason that the boats were found to be on their way to the scene of the disaster, coupled with the endurance required to remain in the water, owing to its temperature. *[It was early April!]*

Pilot Officer Bushell, who was well enough to converse with one of his rescuers, told him that after the mishap, he saw his brother officer, Mr Walker, climb up onto the topmost part of the machine and help Mills to join him. "Afterwards" says Mr Bushell, "I fell unconscious and when I came to, I found they were gone."

### **REMOVED TO HOSPITAL**

Later details regarding the crew of the Bomber confirm the fact that the missing men are Pilot Officer N.C. Walker of Lee-on-Solent and Aircraftsman E. E. Mills, a Cornwall man. Pilot Officer E. Alec. C. Bushell of Walton-on-Thames was, late on Tuesday afternoon, removed to the Aerodrome at Manston. Air Mechanic E. Grennlis [Grellis] (of Portabella, Edinburgh), having to be conveyed to the Ramsgate General Hospital.

No news of the missing aviators was at hand on Wednesday morning, when a flood of sunshine broke over the scene of the previous day's grief.

### **VIVID STORY OF SHOUTS**

Mrs Austin, the manageress of the Beresford Hotel, gives a vivid description of the disaster. She says, "We heard a roar of the engine and saw the aeroplane flying low over the cliff. The guests and all of us at the hotel came out to watch what was happening. The plane seemed to be suddenly swallowed up in the fog and then we heard a thud as the machine struck the water. We listened intently. After a time we heard voices shouting from the mist, "Help! Aren't you coming to help us?" We shouted back, "Yes, we are trying to reach you." We kept on shouting as loud as we could, to give the wrecked men courage while the boats were being put out. Hugh Mitchell, a boy of eighteen or nineteen years ran at full speed with a man named Wilson to Minnis Bay, and put out in a boat. We women did our best by shouting to the men on the aeroplane. Had we had a boat nearer, we might have reached them several minutes before the boats from Minnis Bay."

### **YOUNG SWIMMER AND THE STRONG CURRENT**

The young waiter, James, who, together with Dr Flodd, made a plucky effort to reach the plane, says he heard the machine strike the water with a loud report. Telling the story of the swim to our representative, he said, "On hearing the crash and the cries, I thought I would try to swim out to the wreck, and Dr Flodd offered to go with me. We swam in our clothes for about a quarter of a mile and got within sight of the aeroplane. We saw two men on her, shouting for help. The current was very strong and, handicapped by our clothing, we decided we should have to return for further help. Meantime, boats had put off, and after taking the two airmen on board, they towed the machine towards the shore."

### **THE SEARCH RENEWED**

Boats again put out to search for the missing men but without success. The search was continued to a late hour and a lookout was kept on the cliffs throughout the evening. It is believed that the two missing men either attempted to swim ashore and failed, or slipped exhausted from the wreckage, on which, at one time, they were apparently safe.

The wrecked machine is of a giant twin-engine type, which in February figured in a crash at Cheshunt, a disaster which caused injury to several airmen. On the day following that crash, another machine of the same type came down in a forced landing near Southend, the pilot having a lucky escape.

### **IN A DANGEROUS CONDITION**

On enquiry at Ramsgate General Hospital on Wednesday morning, the 'Gazette' was informed that Aircraftsman Grennlis [Grellis] was about the same – being in a dangerous condition. He was suffering from concussion, a cut face, injuries to ribs and both ankles.

### LATER NEWS

News came to hand at noon on Wednesday, to the effect that Flying Officer Bushell was also lying in a critical condition. He sustained a bad cut on the leg and internal injuries, the latter giving some ground for fear.

Since the disaster, a creditable feat of two of the boatmen has come to light. Mr William Miller, jun. and Mr C. Cuse [Case?] both of Westgate-on-Sea, are stated to have heard the crash, and to have immediately rowed out to the derelict plane off the Gap, reaching there in the remarkable time of thirty-five minutes.

Three aeroplanes circled over the cliffs and sea at the scene of the tragedy on Wednesday morning.

During the afternoon, Mr Bushell was stated to be making highly satisfactory progress.

The Officers of the Royal Air Force Station, Manston, desire through the medium of the 'Gazette', to thank all the residents of Birchington who so kindly rendered assistance at the aeroplane crash. The number of people who kindly rendered assistance was so many that it is impossible to thank them individually.