

11.11.1941

By PAUL ALLONBY, RAeS.

"I'VE NEVER ever enjoyed myself so much as when I am in the air. I have the feeling that I own the world!" - Sub-Lt Gordon Black, 21, pilot, Royal New Zealand Navy.

NOVEMBER 11th 1941. The moorlands of County Durham. Visibility: Nil.

IT WAS common practice for transitting aircraft travelling in wartime to use what was nicknamed "the central highway" - an air corridor along the Pennines to avoid built-up areas, operational air bases, and defensive positions such as balloon barrages.

And it was on this route on Armistice Day - Tuesday November 11th 1941 - that Gordon Black was heading northwards from the Royal Navy Air Station at Lee-on-Solent (HMS Daedelus) to RNAS Crail in Fife.

Gordon was a member of 781 Squadron, a Fleet Air Arm unit with mixed British and Commonwealth air crew, flying the Fairy Swordfish torpedo bomber, an open-cockpit bi-plane usually crewed by a pilot, navigator and a wireless-operator/air-gunner.

He was heading to the Scottish base, used by the Fleet Air Arm and the Royal Air Force, to deliver documentation required for a torpedo training course.

Gordon was flying alone and as such would also have had to navigate the aircraft, travelling below cloud level to chart his route on the map.

The Pennines corridor, while easier to use due to limited aviation activity, was fraught with difficulties, particularly in the winter when heavy snow, rain, sleet and fog hampered airmen.

Crashes were sadly not uncommon - and were mainly fatal, often when aircraft broke cloud to find themselves closer to the rugged moorland than anticipated, or where an aircraft, the pilot hemmed-in by severe weather, simply flew into the ground.

The distance direct between bases was 382-miles, the Swordfish being able to fly 546-miles before it needed refuelling. The direct route would have taken Gordon perilously close to County Durham hilltops with a height of 640-650 metres, so prudently he followed a track to the east.

He took off just after 8am and was 100-miles short of his destination when at 10.45am that day, Gordon's Swordfish - serial W5847 - crashed into the ground in severe weather near the market town of Tow Law, County Durham. Icing was suspected to have forced Gordon to seek a lower height than he'd have liked.

A police report, written by an Inspector Vickers, held by Durham Archives, gives the crash location as Park Wall Farm, and states Gordon suffered severe burns. He died that evening at the County Hospital, in Durham, despite the efforts of medics, having been pulled clear of the blazing aircraft by two farm workers.

GORDON was 21 and one of three sons of Walter "Snowy" Black and Rose Maude Black, of Petone, Wellington, New Zealand.

Educated at Hutt Valley High School, he was part of the 1935 1st XV rugby team at Hutt Valley, and is described in his yearbook as, "a tireless, honest forward, never far from the ball".

He was named after his uncle Gordon, a Private with the Australian Army, who died in the Battle of Passchendale in October 1917.

A total of 792 New Zealanders served as naval aviators in the Fleet Air Arm with some 155 falling as casualties. A further 210 Kiwis served in the FAA in other capacities.

Gordon volunteered to become a pilot when war broke out, and he was among a batch of 20 Kiwis who journeyed to the UK in the spring of 1940 to train as pilots as part of a scheme begun in 1936 where New Zealand military aviators were tutored by the RAF and Fleet Air Arm. Usually they then returned home, but now remained in the UK to serve.

He was assigned to HMS Vincent, Portsmouth, in June 1940, with some 112 classmates for basic training. He then learned to fly on Tiger Moth bi-planes then on Miles Magister monoplanes at Luton, Bedfordshire, during a two-month course with 24 Elementary Flying Training School. Phase Three of his training would take him to Canada.

A LETTER HOME TO FRIENDS:

#31 S F T S (Service Flying Training School)

Hut 12A

Kingston

Ontario

Canada

22 February 1941

Dear Pritch Family,

Of course you will know by now that I am in Canada. I received your Christmas parcel about a week ago

and believe me I was very pleased to do so and so I am writing you this short note in appreciation.

Really there is not much that is new and I suppose that Mum has let you know of all the stuff that I have written previously. About the only thing that I can write about is the planes we fly and flying in general. It probably won't interest you much I will tell you anyhow.

We have been here a month today but have only been flying for a fortnight. In this time I have only done about fourteen hours on these planes. That is eight with an instructor and six on my own. The plane we are now flying, the Fairey Battle, was used as a fighter and light bomber at the beginning of the war but are now being used as trainers.

They are a low winged monoplane weighing some four-and-a-half tons with a top speed of three hundred or thereabouts. After the half-ton Magister which we flew at elementary school you can well imagine that at first we noticed quite a difference. These particular machines incorporate everything found in the modern service plane and so the cockpit is one mass of dials, levers and gadgets. At first it looked quite formidable but after a bit of explaining had been done it wasn't so bad.

I soloed in three hours in these machines which wasn't bad but it should have been better. I have found that once they are in the air they are much easier to fly than the Magister (the Miles M.14 Magister), in fact when properly trimmed they fly themselves. By trimming I mean they have two trimming devices, one in the rudder which can be manipulated to keep the plane on a straight course and one on the elevators on the tail which can be manipulated to make the plane fly straight and level and not climb or dive. These trims are worked by two handles in the cockpit and when set the plane will fly with hands and feet off and so one can sort of relax although it is necessary to keep a close eye on things.

We cannot and do not get as many thrills flying these planes as they are far too heavy to be aerobatic. They only thrill we get is when we do low flying at a height of about fifty feet and something over 200 on the clock. One then gets a sense of speed as you can imagine, everything just tears past at a deuce of a rate. Turning when at this height and speed calls for pretty good judgement – just one mistake with four-and-a-half tons hanging round the universe at that speed – well I'm afraid it would be curtains – the bits just wouldn't be worth picking up. Still in this game one has to take chances of a sort or else what would one be. It's a pretty safe and good game though if we exercise the right amount of care and it doesn't go haywire – I've never ever enjoyed myself as I do when in the air – once up there I just have the feeling that I own the world.

You will remember how I always was keen to fly and when at elementary I used to just live for the next trip. I've never really been scared yet but once or twice I have had a certain feeling when the exercise I was doing backfired on me. For instance, when at Luton I tried a loop one day and when over on my back at the top of the loop the plane stalled on me and seemed to hang there upside down for an eternity before it fell away into a steep dive. In that position I didn't quite know what to do never having been like that before and I guess if it had stayed that way much longer I would have had to come down and changed. When it eventually did get into the dive I knew what to do but I didn't have quite so much experience then. The only cure for that sort of thing is to try it again – I did and got round o.k.

Enough of flying or will be getting bored stiff.

I have received photos from Mum taken at Mary's party, it looked as though it was quite a jolly turn out. I only wish I could have been there just to see the look on her face. I remember how keen she was on having one and am very glad that she was not disappointed. Thanks for the cake too, it arrived here in good order and condition and I didn't waste much time in getting rid of it.

Now a little about this place.

The aerodrome is about three times the area of the rec. and is situated right on the shores of Lake Ontario about 20-miles north of the U.S.A. border (New York about 300-miles). For entertainment inside the camp we have an ice rink, several badminton and basketball courts, a large gym and recreation hall, and very comfortable reading and writing room. The recreation hall is used twice a week for entertainment – it might be a film and another night a concert so you see have plenty to amuse us right here in camp.

If we wish to go out we can catch a bus into Kingston seven-miles to the east and also built on the lake shores. There are several film shows and ice-rinks there and some good dances. The biggest attraction for us are the Chinese restaurants where it is possible to get very good food excellently cooked – we fraternise them quite a bit.

The lake is frozen at this time of the year and we are offered plenty of opportunity to skate. I have found it to be great fun but I have not only received a bit of joy and thrills out of it but a lot of bruises too. Still you know one has to play to learn. This country is of course covered in snow now and is a great sight from the air, all we can see is snow and more snow, but in fact it's a flaming nuisance. I'll admit its great fun on the ground but for us chaps it's just a pain in the neck. After being used to landing on grass we find a lot of difficulty in judging height when landing as it looks just the same from five feet as it does at fifty and consequently some beautiful landings have been made 30 or fifty feet in the air. With grass we know that when we can see the blades to flatten out but not so with snow.

We've rather a good week this week having had six accidents but nothing serious and no one not so much of us scratched. Two chaps landed today with their wheels up – only the prop being bent – one chap ran into another plane while taxing both...

RCAF KINGSTON opened in September 1940. No. 31 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) was the first British & Commonwealth Service Flying Training school to be established in Canada as part of a huge scheme to train Allied airmen to fly and fight.

Thanks to the Fleet Air Arm Museum, and other archives, we are able to piece together the remainder of Gordon's career as a naval aviator including the reminiscences of a course contemporary: Lt-Commander G.M. Aggleton (known as 'G.M.A.')

Gordon arrived at No. 31 on January 25th 1941 with a class of 36 naval ratings, 19 of whom were from

New Zealand after travelling aboard a troopship, in convoy, from Liverpool to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and then by rail via Quebec to Kingston. The base diary there notes their arrival amidst "a bad snow storm, weather very cold and windy."

Flying school records show the Navy pupils on Number Seven Course were: G. M. Aggleton, E. H. Archer, J. Bennet, *G. Black,*L. F. Brown, P. G. Burke, S. J. Carpenter, D. A. Davis, D. G. Elliott, R. W. Elliott, D. K. Evans, J. S. Fay,*A. McD. Garland, E. B. Garrard, E. W. Girdlestone, J. D. M. Harris, *N. S. Hutchings, H. T. Hawken, D. C. Hill, F. L. Holthouse, W. C. Hooson, A. J. Hugill, E. J. Hunt, *G. D. Hunter, W. R.F. Jennings, J. D. Landles, V. N. Longman, J. Lawson, B. A. Maccan, *G. R. Marriott, F. A. J. Pennington, K. P. Proctor, R. W. Spackman, *J. Waller, D. H. Wiren, E. N. Wren. (Those starred fell in service.)

During their time at Kingston, the New Zealand navy aviators also trained alongside their nautical counterparts from Canada who were on a parallel course.

The course included a full package of training in Harvards and Battles, from cross-country exercises to formation flying, dive-bombing to low-level attack tactics.

The log book of G.M.A. shows daily flights in Battle aircraft with RCAF instructors from February 12th to his first solo in a Battle a week later, which was preceded by a check flight with the Chief Flying Instructor, Sqn-Ldr Pattison.

Bad weather led to breaks in flying which then led to students flying twice or three-times daily to make-up time. Aerobatics were carried out in Harvards, with night flying tuition in Battles commencing in April.

When the course ended, G.M.A. had flown 66-hours dual, 71-hours solo.

After graduating in June 1941, Gordon and his colleagues set sail back to the United Kingdom from Halifax, Nova Scotia, via Iceland, disembarking finally in Liverpool. He and his colleagues were then commissioned at a ceremony at Greenwich Naval College, London.

On August 3rd 1941, Gordon was appointed to HMS Heron (RNAS Yeovilton) for intensive training as a torpedo-bomber pilot which involved the students being despatched to RNAS Crail (HMS Jackdaw) in Fife for weapons delivery instruction on Swordfish and Albacore aircraft, during which they logged around 150-hours of flying experience.

Having successfully mastered the skills needed for day and night torpedo and depth charge attack, Gordon went next to RNAS Arbroath (HMS Condor) to the Deck Landing Training School, on October 1st, as a build-up towards operating on aircraft carriers. This was followed by a gunnery training course at RNAS St Merryn (HMS Vulture) near Newquay, Cornwall.

On November 3rd 1941, Gordon joined 781 Squadron, which at the time was a communications unit operating a variety of aircraft including the Swordfish, albeit the Mark One version biplane was to be withdrawn in December 1941 from 781 Sqn for reallocation to a training unit, with a newer mark of Swordfish being introduced in the New Year.

The Commanding Officer was Lt-Cdr Sir George Lewis, appointed on November 7th 1941 and 781 was used to ferry senior personnel and classified documents between Navy establishments.

Gordon was the third RNZ pilot to perish in service (the previous two were also accidents) and one of 17 Kiwis killed during the war while serving with HMS Daedelus.

His funeral was held in the military section of Castletown Cemetery at Sunderland, where he is at rest alongside 47 other WW2 casualties: three British soldiers and 12 servicemen from RAF; 10 Luftwaffe airmen shot down during the Blitz on Sunderland and South Shields, nine airmen from the Royal Canadian Air Force, four from the Royal Australian Air Force, and six airmen from the Polish Air Force.

There are also two more New Zealanders buried there: Pilot-Officer Garth Wells Fuller Carey, DFC, who is the subject of a full biography: <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/.../online.../record/C21921>

and Sgt Al Dunlop: <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/.../online.../record/C23553>

* LAID next to Gordon is Sgt William Maughan McCausland, 24, a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force who was also killed on November 11th 1941. Stationed at RAF Usworth, County Durham, with 55 Operational Training Unit, his Hurricane fighter crashed into a hillside in a snowstorm at Waskerley Reservoir, six-miles north-west of Tow Law. Bill - from Coburg, Ontario - was a pre-war construction engineer in Canada, latterly working on building air bases. He'd been in the RCAF since November 13th 1940, and at Usworth three-weeks. An investigation report said he flew into the hillside "straight-and-level and at a normal cruising speed". When his aircraft failed to return from what should have been a straight-forward cross-country navigation exercise, he was declared overdue. His aircraft was found two-days later. Death had been instant.

* SOURCES INCLUDE: UK National Archives, Durham County Archives, the Torpedo Bay Navy Museum (New Zealand); the Fleet Air Arm Museum (Yeovilton, UK); the Auckland War Memorial Archives; the "Harvards Above" and RCAF.info databases (Canada); the 'Dominion Post' (New Zealand); Tow Law History Society; HMS Daedelus History Society; Mike Aggleton; Hutt Valley School Archives; Leonie Pritchard (of the 'Pritch' family) and Claire Callaghan for sharing and transcribing Gordon's February 1941 letter home; the Met. Office Archives (for confirming the frontal weather patterning on 11.11.1941); the Air Transport Auxiliary Museum for insight into the "central highway"; the Canadian Defence Ministry; Durham Constabulary; North-East (England) WW2 Project, the RCAF Association and Lt-Cdr Peter Archer.

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