

Aircraft Crash in the Brecon Beacons

Proctor NP 216 Jan. 12, 1945

Author, Frank E. Stokes

Dedicated to Myrtle

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**To The Matron and Staff at Merthyr General Hospital in 1945 for their Nursing skills.
To The people of Merthyr whom I came to know and respect for their kindness and
generosity.**

**To Angela Magee of the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority for her help in publishing
this Account.**

To Eddie Doylerush for encouraging me to undertake this exercise.

To Family and friends for their support and encouragement.

To Clive A. Stokes, for proof reading and helpful suggestions in presentation

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, Eddie Doylerush telephoned to introduce himself. Eddie is a GPO telephone engineer living near Conway, North Wales.

He has a lifelong interest in aircraft and flying and during his, many rambles on the high ground of North Wales he had occasionally stumbled upon the wreckage of crashed airplanes. He carefully documented all his finds and eventually had enough material to publish a book on the subject. (1)

Eddie then turned his attention to South Wales with a view to writing a similar book covering that area. His initial research through R.A.F. records had led him to me, Frank Stokes.

During National Service, I had been involved in an aircraft crash and Eddie asked if I remembered anything of the experience and if so would I contribute a few words, as an eyewitness or primary source, for inclusion in his second book. My recollection of the events is still very clear even now and so I was able to provide him with a detailed account of my experiences and observations.

Eddie found the task of gathering material for a second book much more difficult and time consuming than had been the case for the first, perhaps for simple geographic reasons; so, with some encouragement from friends, I decided that as I had already recorded my draft contribution, I would seek to publish the account myself. If, later Eddie wanted to include it in any subsequent work of his, then that would be fine by me, he had inspired me to put pen to paper.

REPORT

I was initially called up to London in January 1944, a year before the War would end. After preliminary training at Usworth, County Durham, then brief postings to Bridlington and Yatesbury, I found myself at RAF No. 4 Radio School, RAF Madley, Hereford. After initial training in Radio Operation, actual flying Training was started. Several airborne exercises had been successfully completed, and without appearing complacent, there was no hint or concern that there would be any problem with the next.

On Friday January 12 1945, at about 14.00hrs with Flt. Lt Thomas as pilot, (a sort of taxi driver), I set out on another routine airborne radio training exercise. There was a healthy covering of snow on the ground, but the runway had been cleared. Once airborne, it was beautifully clear above the cloud ceiling and the exercise was proceeding normally and perhaps a little mundanely.

After flying for some time, I noticed a sudden change in the light conditions. I looked up and saw that the aircraft was entering cloud: the pilot was descending. I think there was a fair degree of turbulence when suddenly the aircraft's engine tone changed dramatically, consistent with an attempt to gain altitude rapidly. From that moment events happened alarmingly quickly. I glanced up and could clearly see the mountain looming directly ahead of us, as pilot Thomas continued his urgent and ultimately futile attempts to climb.

The port wing struck a rocky outcrop and the aircraft slewed to the left, coming to rest on a relatively flat patch of ground; I was rendered unconscious.

On coming to, I discovered I was still in my seat, lying on my side. My shins were lacerated where I had struck the T1154 Transmitter and my right eye and bridge of nose were cut: I must have struck the R1155 Receiver. I had also received a compression fracture of two spinal vertebrae, but did not know about that until much later. I was not wearing my seat belt, as it was usual to undo the lap strap when airborne!

Flight lieutenant Thomas had been thrown forward clear of the aircraft. He was lying on his back, unconscious, breathing heavily with blood oozing from his nose. He was a heavy man, but I managed with some difficulty to turn him onto his side so that his air passages were less likely to become blocked. I then had the idea to try and wrap him in my parachute canopy for warmth, but as I pulled the ripcord, the canopy filled quickly and the strong wind carried it away. I simply didn't have the strength to hold it.

I thought about trying to set up a signal using the aircraft landing lights, but without any tools, this was an impossibility. It was getting very late in the afternoon, and I decided I could not afford to hang around any longer, or we would both perish from exposure to the elements if not our injuries. Thoughts of happier times passed through my mind as I looked at the desolation all around me. All I could see was the snow-covered mountaintop.

I set off in the direction of a downward slope. Fortunately, it was not too steep and despite my injuries, I moved at a fair pace with obvious urgency, I needed to get help to the pilot and quickly. There were two streams, which had to be carefully negotiated. After a short while I looked to my left and could see a road (Brecon-Merthyr Tydfil), perhaps a mile away! When I eventually reached it, I found that I was near The Storey Arms Youth Hostel. Fortunately, there was a Warden in residence. He was able to stop a passing motorist, and after giving the directions to the scene of the crash, I was taken to Hospital in Merthyr Tydfil, by which time it was getting dark.

In Hospital, I was treated for the effects of shock and had my leg and facial wounds stitched and dressed. I remained in hospital for several weeks, during which time I made a slow but steady recovery. Two senior RAF Officers came to attend my bedside early on, and conducted a preliminary investigation in the recovery ward. It was only then that I learned with great sadness that F.Lt Thomas had not survived the crash.

F.Lt. Thomas's sister visited me in Hospital, which was very kind of her considering the grief and anguish she must have been experiencing at the tragic loss of her brother. Perhaps she wanted to make sense of her brother's death or just meet someone who had been the last person to see him alive. She may have believed I had spoken with him after the crash, but that had not been possible as he was in a deep state of unconsciousness. She was an intelligent, perceptive woman, an undergraduate at Newcastle upon Tyne University. I told her what I could about events and she went on her way. There was no further communication between us.

After discharge from Hospital, I returned to RAF Credenhill, near Hereford. There I was X-rayed and told I had compression fractures of the 11th and 12th dorsal vertebrae and told to return to bed without delay. This all seemed somewhat pointless, as I had been walking around, albeit a little stiffly, from about the fourth day of being confined to hospital.

From Credenhill, I went to Cosford where a specialist examined me and decided I was to be sent to a convalescence unit at Blackpool, ah the benefits of healing Lancastrian sea air!

After several weeks recuperating in Blackpool, completing numerous tedious therapeutic exercises daily, I was returned in May 1945, to Madley. There I was able to finally complete my training as a Signaler and was also made up to the rank of Sergeant! Almost immediately, I became acquainted with the word 'redundant'.

I spent the next two years at RAF Hednesford, Staffordshire and RAF West Kirby, Wirral undertaking accountancy tasks for which I had retrained at RAF Kirkham, Lancashire. Finally, I was discharged from the RAF in May 1947.

I was given a 15% Disability pension, which was later reduced to 10% shortly afterwards, probably because I appeared to be remarkably fit, and later the pension was terminated with a final lump sum.

Summary

At this point, I should say that despite the injuries I sustained on a mountainside near Brecon, I have been fortunate in never at any time having suffered as a consequence.

Following the accident, The R.A.F. issued a rather generous citation for Distinguished Conduct (Appendix A). It has always seemed a bit daft to be praising anyone for saving their own life and acting with a degree of common sense!

After becoming acquainted with Eddie Doylerush, I learned a bit more about F.Lt. Thomas. He had been a pilot at RAF Valley, Anglesey where Roy Sloan worked as a civilian. Roy Sloan actually makes mention of him in a Book (2) he, Sloan, had penned. The extract (Appendix B) provides a very relevant postscript to an event, of which Sloan could not have been aware.

A brief account of the crash appeared in a Brecon Beacons National Park pamphlet (3) in which the cause of the accident is given as 'not known'. However, a later version does give details of the cause of the accident. There is no acknowledgement of the source of the information.

Poscript

It's an ill wind that blows no good for anybody and so it was for me. My stay in Hospital at Merthyr Tydfil was a life changing experience I would not have missed for anything.

St Luke's Ward at Merthyr Tydfil General Hospital was wholly given over to the Army. The Matron and nursing staff in the conventional fashion ran it and there was no hint of military discipline i.e. no Officer or N.C.O in charge. The patients were mostly lively, local Welshmen, who had been returned home after being wounded, some quite severely, in Burma. They had fought the Japanese in the jungle with some considerable success, mainly by speaking only Welsh! The Japanese soldiers were avid listeners, (unseen and often at very close quarters). They did not understand a single word of what they heard!

As for the men themselves, there they were, back home and in Hospital, only a short distance from their beloved wives whom they had not seen for a very, very long time. However, this was not to be an insuperable problem for long. Soon after Matron had bade us good night after supper, these brave lads, some barely able to walk, were away out of the back of the ward, and over the wall to freedom with the aid of a ladder left conveniently to hand. They were always back in the ward for roll call by morning. I never could quite work out if matron knew exactly what was going on and simply turned a blind eye. Perhaps she believed the arrangement was as good as any medicine or bandaging the hospital could offer.

These men Of South Wales were the salt of the earth. They were kindness itself. They would take others like myself to their homes where there was generous hospitality within the limits of wartime rationing. Outside, old men would offer cigarettes or money, which one knew they could not really afford. It was acutely embarrassing, as to have declined would have felt incredibly rude and was therefore out of the question.

I learned to respect and admire the deep warmth and humanity of the people of Merthyr, who despite the great hardship they had suffered pre-war, maintained a cheerfulness, which I fear many others would not have been able to match.

Above all their sense of humour came through, time and time again, as would their love of music and singing. Often in the morning in the ward when we were all washed and shaved and sitting up in bed, waiting for matron's inspection, there would be a spontaneous singing of one of many Welsh hymns or songs followed by silence, until the next time.

Listening to the radio, when Maudie Edwards came on always brought forth a parochial cheer. I could go on. I really took to the men from the Valleys.

I have been back to The Brecon Beacons. The first time was whilst I was still under the care of the Hospital. I went with a local man and walked some way up the mountain, but I do not know if I was anywhere near the site of the crash. Other than this I have toured the area around the Beacons with Myrtle my wife (who sadly died in May 2004), though we never attempted to walk or climb in the area.

Bibliography

- (1) No Landing Place, Eddie Doylerush, Midland Counties Publications.
- (2) Wings of War over Gwynedd, Roy Sloan, Chap. 4, pp 63,64.
- (3) Aircraft Crashes; Brecon Beacons National Park Pamphlet.
This includes a sketch map of the Brecon Beacons National Park with numbers indicating the crash sites. No. 11 is the location of the crash described above.
There is a short description of the event in the text.

Appendices

- (A) Copy of the original RAF Citation.
- (B) Extract from Sloan's book, (see ref.2)
- (C) Photograph of the Brecon Beacons. Showing Corn Du and The Storey Arms hostel. (Courtesy of The Brecon Beacons Park Authority).

Scanned copy of the original RAF citation

Serial No.'s.....10/12.
Page.....1.
Date.....14th February 1945.

GROUP ROUTINE ORDERS

BY

AIR VICE-MARSHAL J. R. CASSIDY C.B.E.
COMMANDING NO. 27 GROUP, ROYAL AIR FORCE.

10.

DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT

No. 2211815 A.C.2. STOKES F.E. - No. 4 Radio School, Madley.

The Air Officer Commanding No. 27 Group has instructed that the name of the above-mentioned airman is to be brought to notice in accordance with the terms of King's Regulations and Air Council Instructions paragraph - 2132, clause 19(a) (iii) in respect of the following incident:-

A.C.2. STOKES WAS CONDUCTING A W/T EXERCISE FROM R.A.F. STATION MADLEY WHEN THE AIRCRAFT IN WHICH HE WAS FLYING CRASHED INTO THE MOUNTAIN SIDE IN CLOUD 1,500 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL. THE PILOT WAS UNCONSCIOUS AFTER THE CRASH AND A.C.2. STOKES WAS THROWN OUT AND WAS BADLY INJURED. A.C.2. STOKES ENDEAVOURED TO USE THE CANOPY OF HIS PARACHUTE TO PROTECT THE PILOT, AND THEN HE ADMINISTERED FIRST-AID. HE ALSO TRIED TO MAKE USE OF THE AIRCRAFT LANDING AND NAVIGATION LIGHTS AS A MEANS OF SIGNALLING BUT WHEN HE FOUND THAT HE WAS PHYSICALLY UNABLE TO REMOVE THE LIGHTS HE SET OFF DOWN THE MOUNTAIN TO FETCH HELP. THE WEATHER WAS BITTERLY COLD AND THERE WAS A GALE OF WIND BLOWING. A.C.2. STOKES WAS SUFFERING SEVERELY FROM SHOCK AND IN GREAT PAIN BUT HE STRUGGLED ON, WADING THROUGH TWO STREAMS AS HE MADE HIS WAY TO THE ROAD. HE STOPPED A LORRY AND WAS TAKEN INTO A HOSTEL, BUT IT WAS NOT UNTIL HE HAD DIRECTED THE RESCUE PARTY TO THE SCENE OF THE CRASH THAT HE PERMITTED HIMSELF TO BE TAKEN TO HOSPITAL.

IT IS CONSIDERED THAT A.C.2. STOKES' SPLENDID SPIRIT AND PROMPT ACTION NOTWITHSTANDING HIS OWN SERIOUSLY INJURED CONDITION SET AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE, AND ARE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE BEST TRADITIONS OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE.

(ii) A copy of this Group Routine Order is being forwarded to the Air Officer i/c Records for inclusion in A.C.2. STOKES' permanent record.

(iii) This order is to be reproduced in Daily Routine Orders at all Stations in this Group.

27G/2902/13/P.2. (P.1.)

Appendix B

Extract of Wings of War over Gwynedd, Roy Sloan, Chap. 4, P.63 Para. 5. et seq.

“Training commenced on 3rd January 1943 with forty pupils from No.2 Signals school who made up No1 Wop/Air Gunners Course.

On the following day the unit experienced its first accident at Mona when Martinet HP134 swung violently on landing, careered off the runway and struck a pile of stones which had been left alongside the runway by civilian contractors engaged on the airfield construction.

The Pilot, Pilot Officer E.P.Thomas, who was unhurt in the accident, was an interesting and somewhat unusual character. He was the son of an extremely wealthy Nigerian dignitary, and was believed to be the only Nigerian flying with the RAF at the time. His skin was as dark as it could possibly be, earning him the nickname at Mona –“23.59”! This was reference to the 24 hour clock used in the services, 23.59 being one minute to midnight of course, and the darkest part of the night.

Thomas was an engaging and attractive personality, well liked and popular with his colleagues, and was exceptionally religious. Normally courteous and gentlemanly, he would let himself go at social events such as mess parties after being persuaded to take a few drinks and would demonstrate wild African dances in a most impressive manner.

Undoubtedly, his personal qualities were of the highest order but the same could not be said of Thomas’s flying. He had a tendency to be involved in mishaps and accidents rather more frequently than one would have expected. It was rumoured that whenever he ‘bent’ an aircraft his father would always foot the bill.

On 11th February the Ministry of Information Colonial Film Unit arrived at Mona to make some shots of Pilot Officer Thomas in action for eventual inclusion in a propaganda film to be shown in the colonies.” (*continues*).

Appendix C

Corn Du and Storey Arms, near the site of the aircraft crash





Frank Stokes, then and now

left taken in Bridlington c. June 1944

below taken recently while on holiday in France with two of his eleven grandchildren

