

## ONE OF OUR SUNDERLANDS IS MISSING

With the intense activity during 1943 in the Middle East there was an urgent demand to maintain the transport links from the UK to Cairo and also because Cairo was the Middle East hub from there to other parts of Africa, the Middle East and India. BOAC was hard-stretched to cover its commitments and late in 1942 six Sunderland Mk IIIs were taken off the production line at Rochester and converted for transport duties with the Corporation. They were delivered during 1943, the last one of this batch, G-AGIB (ML729) being delivered on 15 September having first flown on the tenth of that month.

Pressed into service almost immediately G-AGIB operated a number of flights from the UK to Cairo and India with her final flight to Cairo on 4 November 1943. After spending the night on the Nile at Rod El Faraq she took off on her last fateful flight to Djerba Island off the Tunisian coast. She was airborne at 1950GMT on 5 November operating as flight 18M5. On board were nine crew and ten military and VIP passengers including Albert Kingsley-Heath OBE, the Commandant of the Kenya Police Force.

In command was Captain J S Shakespeare, an experienced ex-Imperial Airways pilot. With him was Supernumerary Captain R Mountain (also an experienced BOAC pilot), First Officer R E John, First Officer I M Burch, Navigating Officer T Harrild, Second Radio Officer J Blackshaw – all seconded RAF personnel – and Radio Officer P Estell as well as Engineer Officers Potter and Cope who were all regular BOAC staff.

With a cruising speed of 165mph the flightplan from Cairo to Djerba showed an ETA of 0345GMT on 6 November, some seven hours 55 minutes flying time. The weather was good with excellent visibility and Captain Shakespeare and his crew settled down for a routine flight as they headed off into the night. The flight appeared to be progressing well with no problems. At 2224GMT Captain Shakespeare passed a revised ETA for Djerba to Ground Control via W/T. After that there was no word from the flying boat.

By an amazing coincidence Captain Needham was flying a reciprocal service that night from Djerba Island to Cairo; he was flying along the Tunisian coast many miles north of the track of G-AGIB which was flying inland over the desert. At 2245GMT his First Officer noticed a glow in the sky a long way off to the right and he instantly drew Captain Needham's attention to the phenomenon. As they both looked at this distant light it temporarily faded, then grew again in intensity before finally fading into blackness. They duly reported this unusual sight to Ground Control little realising at the time that they had witnessed the demise of a number of their colleagues.

Meanwhile, as G-AGIB's ETA passed with no news the staff at Djerba grew anxious and overdue action was initiated. The earlier reported sighting of a glow in the sky became ominous and BOAC Cairo despatched three aircraft as soon as it was light to search along the intended track of the Sunderland. Meanwhile, RAF Air HQ Middle East despatched a Wellington ASR aircraft. This plane subsequently located a wreck early on the morning of 7 November at El Taurub Tawali,

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which is in the Libyan Desert, some 530 feet above sea level and 130 miles south of Tobruk. A BOAC landplane piloted by Captain Tagart also spotted the wreckage and was able to land alongside. He confirmed the plane was a Sunderland and that there were no survivors. An Army Long Range Desert patrol vehicle then set out carrying BOAC investigators to this inhospitable site.

It was soon apparent that a major fire had occurred behind the starboard outer engine near to the front spar, fuelled probably by a large petrol leak in the wing. It was ascertained that the starboard outer fire extinguisher had been activated once the flames were spotted, but this had obviously been to no avail.

The flightplan had been for a 4,000ft cruise along this sector with a heading of 267deg. It seems likely that Captain Shakespeare had dived the aircraft into a violent sideslip to try and carry the flames outboard of the wing, then realising the proximity of the ground he must have contemplated a force landing in darkness in the desert. However, the intensity of the fire caused the starboard wing outboard of the starboard outer engine to break away along the rib inboard of the float attachment. The starboard outer engine and nacelle that fell off the big flying boat then entering a vertical dive for the final few seconds. The whole episode would have been over in two minutes, such was the intensity of the blaze.

The loss of two experienced pilots was particularly felt along with the rest of the crew and passengers. Captain Shakespeare, aged 36, had served in the RAF between 1928 and 1933. He then flew with North Eastern Airways before moving to Imperial. He became an Acting Captain in August

1939 with confirmation with February 1940. He was posted to the Atlantic Division in 1940 moving to the Boeing 314 flight in January the following year.



He was co-pilot on the Prime Minister's return flight from the USA in January 1942 and again for Churchill's outbound and return flights in June of that year. At the time of the accident he had flown a total of 5,660 hours including 721 hours on Empire flying boats. He was married with a young son of 2¾ years. Captain Mountain had 6,818 hours total flying time with no less than 3,482 hours in command of flying boats.

The investigation team was faced with a difficult task, working in harsh, remote desert conditions. The most likely cause centred on an electrical source. A leakage around the flowmeter transmitter units which built up in the starboard wing over a period of time followed by an electrical spark was considered. The total of fuel still on board at the time of the fire was estimated at some 1,200 gallons. Another possibility considered was that on smelling petrol one of the Engineers had crawled into the wing to investigate and inadvertently caused a spark by knocking his torch on a metal structural member.

Possibilities of sabotage or enemy action were ruled out as was the

accidental ignition of one of the incendiary bombs carried for use by the Navigator for tail drift sight checks over the desert at night. Insufficient bonding in the structure causing a build-up of static electricity was also ruled out as was a failure of the reduction gear housing.

The exact cause of this tragedy could not be determined in the end, particularly as most of the aircraft's structure had been consumed in the severe fire and the violent final impact.

The recommendations including

- moving the flowmeter transmitter unit terminal boxes to a position remote from the fuel lines
- drainage holes to be drilled in the bottom corner of every rib stiffener panel in the wing to prevent a build up of any leaking fuel in one area
- the issue of flameproof hand torches to Flight Engineers

Thankfully, there were no repetitions of major wing fires with the remaining BOAC Sunderland fleet, which continued to fulfil a vital transport role during the rest of the war.

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