



Crash of Heinkel Bomber near Whitby

Jane Ellis

At Sleights Road End, the junction of the A169 Whitby-Pickering road with the A171 Whitby-Guisborough road, is an unobtrusive stone pillar on which is an inscription by North Riding County Council (forerunner to North Yorkshire County Council). Few of the thousands of motorists who pass by it daily stop to read it. The pillar itself is interesting as it is a remnant of the bridge over the River Esk between Sleights and Briggswath which was washed away in a 1930 flood, while the plaque commemorates a significant event in our history, namely the first successful shooting down of an enemy aircraft on English soil in World War 2. It happened on 3rd February 1940, a bitterly cold and snowy day in the middle of a particularly severe winter.

At 9.03 am the operators at Danby Beacon Radar Station located three German medium bombers, Heinkel 111s, attacking an unarmed fishing trawler in the North Sea, killing the skipper and wounding two of the crew. Flight Lieutenant Peter Townsend was one of three fighter pilots from 43 Squadron scrambled from RAF Acklington, Northumberland, to intercept the Luftwaffe aircraft.

According to Townsend's 1969 book 'Duel of Eagles', since the cloudbase was low, he and his colleagues flew southwards over the sea at the maximum speed of

their Hawker Hurricanes, almost skimming the waves so as to have the best chance of seeing the enemy before they themselves were spotted.

They engaged their adversaries at 9.40 am. Townsend was successful in disabling one of the Heinkels, no. 3232. Its German crew of four had been on duty since 2.00 am, helping to shovel snow and clear the airfield at Westerland, a remote airstrip on an island off the Danish coast, before they could take off for their five-hour flight across the North Sea. In the encounter observer Peter Leushake was killed outright, flight engineer Johann Meyer was fatally wounded, and Karl Missy, operating the top rear gun, was hit in his back and legs but continued to return fire - though his single machine gun was no match for the Hurricane's eight .303 Brownings.

Pilot Hermann Wilms, rather than ditch in the North Sea, decided to crash-land his damaged bomber close to Whitby, flying so low above the town that astonished local people could see him through the cockpit window. He guided his stricken plane down, narrowly avoiding hitting a barn but smashing through telegraph wires, and crash-landed near Bannial Flatt Farm. The plane's right wing hit a tree and it came to rest in a snow-covered field close to the farm buildings. The Whitby Gazette reported that the

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snow in the fields was stained red by a trail of the blood of the wounded airmen dripping from the aircraft as it approached the crash site. To this day there is a noticeable gap in the line of trees at this location.

Wilms managed to drag Leushake from the wreckage before realising that he was already dead, then with the help of Missy, who was himself badly injured, he managed to pull out Meyer, who had blood pouring from his wounds. Special Constable Arthur Barratt was one of the first on the scene and climbed into the cockpit to find Wilms burning confidential papers, though enough remained intact for the Intelligence Service to make good use of them. Whilst local people were attending to the injured, Wilms attempted to set fire to the plane, but with a combination of fire extinguishers and shovelfuls of snow the fire was put out. The two injured men, frozen with cold, were carried into the farmhouse, given tea and wrapped in

blankets with hot water bottles. An ambulance took them to Whitby Cottage Hospital where Meyer was pronounced dead. Missy survived, though suffered a leg amputation as a result of his injuries. Townsend later visited him in Whitby Cottage Hospital; he shook Missy's hand and gave him a tin of 50 Players cigarettes and a bag of oranges.

The two airmen who did not survive were buried with full military honours at Catterick. The wreath on their coffins read simply 'From 43 Squadron, with Sympathy'.

Townsend, having risen to the rank of Group Captain, was to become well known in later years when he was romantically linked with Queen Elizabeth's sister Princess Margaret. Although the pair wished to marry, the 'Establishment' and the conventions of the time prevented them from doing so. In 1969 he was once again to meet Karl Missy, this time in the comradeship of ex-servicemen, and they remained friends until Missy's death in 1981.



Find out more

The memorial plaque is on a squat sandstone pillar near Bannial Flatt Farm, on the south-east corner of the junction of the A171 and A169 just outside Whitby, grid ref. NZ 870 099.

More on the Heinkel Bomber: <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/collections/heinkel-he111h-20/>

More on the incident: <http://www.yorkshire-aircraft.co.uk/aircraft/planes/40/1hfm.html>



Bannial Flatt Farm cottages



Plaque on the memorial pillar near the crash site



Model of the crash site, Whitby Museum