

Lightning strikes twice

Whitley V LA882, 17th November 1943



Staff... Sergeant Pilot Jim Double, staff pilot at No 10 Radio School, RAF Carew Cheriton, photographed by an Oxford trainer.

Jim Double

From the controls of his Anson Jim Double kept a close eye on the gathering storm clouds as he headed for his home base at RAF Carew Cheriton. As the skies that November afternoon grew ever darker Jim received a message to stay airborne and turn southwards out over the coast - away from the threatening thunderstorm until it had cleared.

Jim was well used to the vagaries of the weather in west Wales as he had been flying from Carew Cheriton for several months - since his posting there as a staff pilot at No 10 Radio School in April 1943.

As the rain lashed at his Anson Jim noticed the unmistakable nose-down shape of a Whitley bomber on a parallel course, also trying to clear the area of the storm. He would always remember what happened next, in a few shocking seconds.

"Suddenly my Anson was struck by lightning, as was the Whitley. The Whitley exploded with the loss of the entire crew," Jim was to recall years later when he wrote the story of his wartime flying.

"My port engine lit up momentarily with a brilliant purple halo, but kept going. We found all radio equipment was dead; we had lost the trailing aerial and had no intercom working."

Jim and his crew of young trainee wireless operators had to stooge around for some time while the storm eased and for the majority of the other aircraft also flying from Carew to land. Only then could Jim bring the Anson over the airfield and fire off a Verrey light - a pistol flare - to alert those on the ground that he had no radio contact.

Finally, Jim settled the Anson down on the runway and taxied to a dispersal. He immediately checked for damage from the lightning strike.

"The Anson had small round holes burnt into the leading edge of the wing, along its entire length, going right through to the trailing edge. It meant a new spar had to be fitted."

A sad aftermath came a few days later with Jim in the bearer party as the coffins of the six Whitley crewmen were taken from the mortuary at Tenby and put on trains from the local station. Five of the Whitley crew were RAF Volunteer Reserve airmen while the sixth was a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force. They were from 10 Operational Training Unit, based at Abingdon, Oxfordshire, and were flying a relatively new Whitley Mark V, LA882, powered by twin Rolls-Royce Merlins engines. It was one of the final Whitleys produced - from the penultimate batch delivered to the RAF in February and March 1943.

Twenty-one-year-old Pilot Sergeant Richard Curnow and his crew had taken off at 10.42 am from the satellite station of Stanton Harcourt for a cross-country navigational exercise - an essential part of the training programme they had to complete before posting to an operational bomber squadron.

Sadly, their encounter with the thunderstorm over west Wales was to prove fatal; all too often young trainee aircrew fell foul of the UK's ever changing and often violent weather patterns.

Whitley LA882 plunged to earth at New Inn Farm, St Florence, in rural south Pembrokeshire, where the remains of a crater made by the stricken bomber can still be identified. As was usual in such cases, an enquiry was held by the RAF, the accident investigators coming to the conclusion that one of the aircraft's mainplanes had been struck by lightning.

In a report the Accident Investigation Branch attributed the cause of the accident to the pilot losing control when flying in close proximity to a severe thunderstorm. "In addition to very severe air turbulence, which must undoubtedly been encountered, the aircraft was actually struck by lightning," the report added.

Although by then there were several airmen's graves at the cemetery at nearby Carew Cheriton none of the Whitley crew

were buried locally. At the requests of their families the five RAF men were buried in their home areas while Canadian Navigator, Flight Sergeant William Herbert Oakley, was interred in a regional war cemetery at Bath.

During a year as a staff pilot with the Radio School at Carew Cheriton, Jim Double accumulated many flying hours in both Anson and Oxford trainers as the busy station turned out a regular stream of wireless and radar operators. In April 1944 his time in west Wales came to an end when he was posted. Jim was keen to get an operational posting on the Mosquitoes, one of the most potent of all wartime aircraft, but he ended up on the

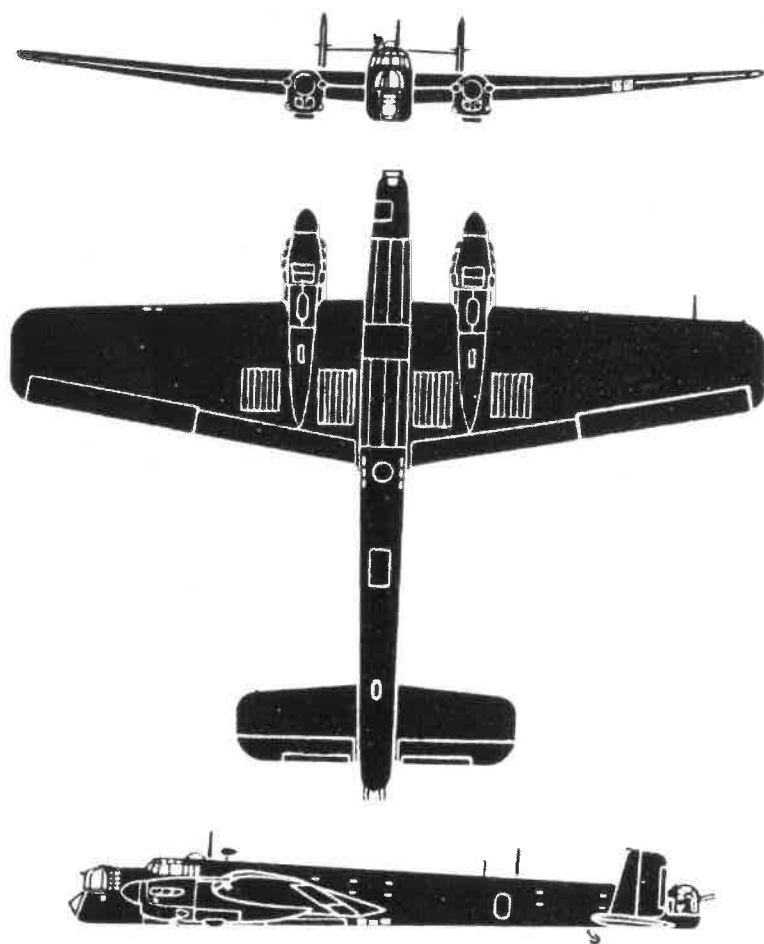


Recognition... A much photographed Whitley V which featured in wartime aircraft recognition publications.

RAF Museum P787

Burma front, flying the large and impressive P-47 Thunderbolt single-engined fighter. His last operational flight was in early August 1945, just before the war against Japan ended, by which time he was a Warrant Officer.

His own story, entitled 'Never a Doodle', was privately published in the late 1990s, with all proceeds going to a hospice which had cared for his wife.



Feature... Line drawings of Whitley V from the Valentines series of aircraft recognition cards which includes the description: 'A characteristic feature is the nose-down flying attitude'.

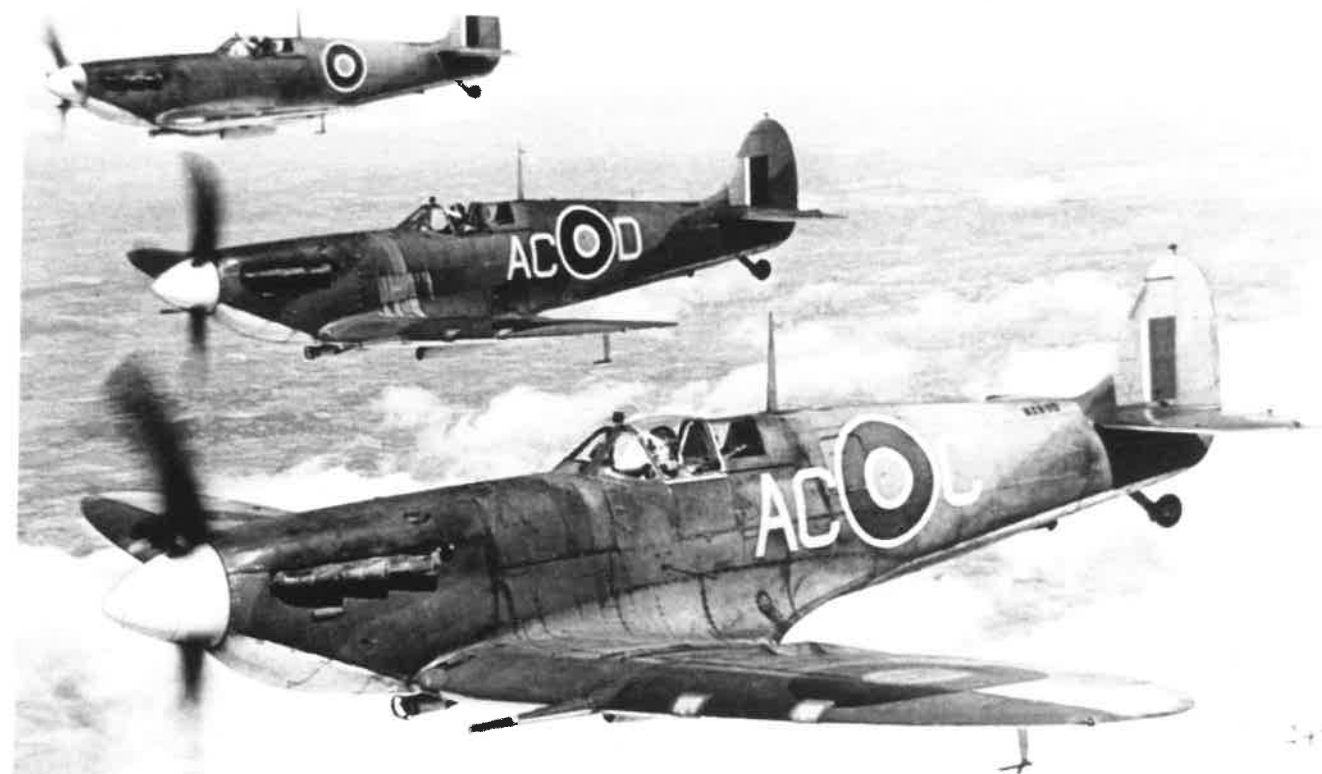
Author's Collection

Crew List:

- Sergeant Richard Curnow, RAFVR, Pilot, aged 21, son of William Stanley and Millicent Curnow of Redruth. He is buried at Camborne-Redruth (Illogan) Cemetery
- Pilot Officer Michael Hilary Watson, RAFVR, Air Bomber, aged 18, son of Leonard Francis and Madeline Mary Watson of Preston Hall, near Maidstone. He is buried at Aylesford Cemetery, Kent
- Flight Sergeant William Herbert Oakley, RCAF, Navigator, aged 21, son of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel W. Oakley of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He is buried at Bath (Haycombe) Cemetery
- Sergeant George Walter William Crick, RAFVR, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, aged 21, son of George A. Crick and Mary J. Crick of Wandsworth, London. He is buried at Wandsworth (Streatham) Cemetery
- Sergeant Ivan Henry Hill, RAFVR, Air Gunner, aged 19, son of George Henry and Mary Hill of Kingston-on-Soar. He is buried at Kingston-on-Soar (St Winifred's) Churchyard, Nottinghamshire
- Sergeant Leonard Walter Coleman, RAFVR, Air Gunner, aged 28, son of Walter Thomas Coleman and Lydia Elizabeth Coleman of Plumstead, London. He is buried at Plumstead Cemetery

CHAPTER 8

Last flight of a Seafire Supermarine Seafire Ib NX906, 3rd November 1944



Hooked... Three Seafire Ibs in formation, the nearest - NX890 - being closely linked in the serial number sequence to the Haverfordwest casualty. The Seafire had various modifications for naval operations, principle one being the addition of an arrestor hook for landing on aircraft carriers. These Seafires were operated by No 736 Squadron, another Fleet Air Arm second line unit. MAP X04274.

Keen eyed residents from Pembrokeshire's county town of Haverfordwest who were about on an early November day in 1944 could not have missed the spectacle of two fighter aircraft performing in the sky above the town.

As they carried out aerobatic manoeuvres they were easily identifiable as Spitfires. It was then noticed that one had

disappeared but no-one then realised that, in those few short seconds, this aircraft had dived into the ground, claiming the life of its young pilot.

The aircraft were not, in fact, Spitfires but the naval derivative, the Seafire, in so many respects identical to perhaps the most famous fighter plane of all time.