

# MOORDOWN HALIFAX MEMORIAL

**A copy of the Moordown 2010 Committee email to the RAF Air Historical Branch (AHB) of 31.10.11.**

**Further to this email - and to subsequent telephone conversations - their reply of January 2012 is also attached...**

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**From: Roger Shore (for the Moordown 2010 Committee)**

**To: RAF Air Historical Branch**

Sent: Monday, October 31, 2011 7:19 PM

Subject: Loss of Handley Page Halifax JP137

Dear AHB,

## **The loss of Handley Page Halifax JP137 (21.03.44)**

A Memorial to the 7 crew, and 2 civilians, who lost their lives when JP137 crashed onto the Bournemouth suburb of Moordown, in the early hours of the morning of 21st March 1944, was unveiled and dedicated on the 10th of July this year.

As a member of the Memorial organising committee, I contacted you in May this year, and Stuart Hadaway was kind enough to recommend an appropriate order for the aircrew to appear on the Memorial, which was duly followed. Thank you for that.

Part of the early preparations for the Memorial involved contacting the families of the victims. One result of that endeavour was for us to be concerned that the family of the pilot, Sgt. Denis Roy Evans, did not at first wish to become involved with the Memorial. Sgt. Evans niece, Pauline Richardson, explained that her father, Vere Derek Evans (the pilot's brother, and himself a serving RAF pilot)) had always been led to believe that the inquiry following the crash of JP137 had blamed Sgt. Evans for the loss of the aircraft.

As Vere Derek is no longer with us, sadly he took that memory to his grave.

Although the records appear to be far from complete, the surviving AM1180 Accident Record Card merely comments that Sgt. Evans **may** have been flying visually, and that **may** have caused the aircraft to stall, and precipitate the crash. This, as I understand it, was often a common 'starting point' on many such RAF records at that time, and was mostly concerned with the legalities of possible subsequent civilian compensation claims?

As there were no survivors of this crash, and there was therefore no way for Sgt. Evans to defend himself against that assertion, I understand that any such claim could only have been speculative. It would not have been recorded as any part of the final 'blame or disciplinary procedure'. Indeed, we can see that the actual 'Blame and Discip Action' box on the AM1180 form remains empty.

When taken together with evidence of other reported events of that night - the report on the AM1180 of the port wing 'dropping' - and the (now) known very serious defect with the Halifax MKII triangular tail fin - which the AM1180 specifically mentions - it seems highly possible that the aircraft was in trouble early on, and that there was no way to avoid the subsequent crash. There are also a substantial number of civilian reports, many recently confirmed following a local newspaper request for witnesses, of the aircraft being seen to be on fire, in the air, before the crash.

I would submit that it is not unreasonable to conclude that a fault - possibly an engine fire - at the critical time during take off of this fully laden aircraft, could have precipitated a stall, and rudder overbalance, which was not recoverable?

It has always been the Committee's intention to relay those thoughts - plus the comments on the AM1180 - back to the Evans family, in an attempt to correct their misconception that Sgt. Evans had been officially blamed.

Notes of that intention were, in due course, picked up by local journalists, and in turn, relayed on to the BBC and the national press. As result, the Daily Mail had us down as a 'Campaign to clear the Pilot's Name,' (link to Mail article here <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2031083/Family-World-War-Two-pilot-blamed-fatal-crash-exonerated-fresh-witness-accounts-emerge.html> ) which suggests a rather more grandiose ambition from that we had originally proposed, as you will see from my comments above. But that is the nature of journalism...

However, I do feel obliged to contact the Evans family, as the Committee has always intended, and to forward the following comments. I do appreciate how difficult it would be to amend any official records after all this time, but at the same time, it's also probably not actually necessary....

Do you see any contradictions in my forwarding the following details to the Evans family?:

- The Court of Inquiry findings, noted on the surviving AM1180 Accident Record Card, do not 'blame' the pilot for the crash. They do suggest that he **may** have been flying visually, instead of on instruments, but have no way of knowing whether that was the case. This was a fairly common comment from similar Courts of Inquiry, at that time.
- Note that the 'Blame and Discip Action' box on the AM1180 form remains empty. No blame was actually recorded.
- The AM1180 notes specifically mention the defect with the aircraft tail. This is now known to have been a very serious airframe defect (ref:Chapter 1: 'The Disappearing Halifaxes' from 'Boscombe Down 1939-45 A Most Secret Place' - (Johnson and Heffernan)) , and even a small problem on take off could cause rudder overbalance, and an inevitable stall spin, from which there was no recovery, at that height and airspeed.
- There is much independent anecdotal evidence of the aircraft on fire in the air, although this is not specifically recorded in the surviving official documents, as far as we can tell. (The AM1180 form does however mark 'fire' in the ACC. CODE NO. box. There is also a 'ACF' abbreviation in the FIRE box, although we have not, as yet, found any definition for that code)

- Certainly, everyone connected with the Memorial, from the organising Committee, to the surviving witnesses from that night, are firmly of the opinion that there was nothing Sgt. Evans could have done to save the aircraft that night.

I do appreciate that some of these comments are slightly speculative, even if they seem eminently reasonable, and I do understand that it is difficult to challenge any new 'evidence' this far after the event, but I am hoping you can at least agree that there is nothing in my comments likely to contradict the 'official' version, and that we can reassure the Evans family that the RAF Court of Inquiry did **not** specifically blame Sgt. Evans - or anyone else - for the crash that night.

Apologies for the length of this document. I do hope you can follow my line of reasoning.

If there are any comments you would prefer I modify, before contacting the Evans family, please let me know.

Yours sincerely,  
Roger Shore (for the Moordown 2010 Committee)

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Your Reference

Our Reference  
D/AHB(RAF)8/27  
Date  
25 January 2012

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*Dear Mr Shore,*

**Loss of Handley Page Halifax JP137**

I am writing in response to your e-mails and our recent telephone conversation regarding the tragic loss of Handley Page Halifax JP137, which crashed in Bournemouth shortly after taking off from RAF Hurn on 21 March 1944. I do apologise that it has taken so long to come back to you.

I can confirm the fundamental point which we discussed, which is that the RAF enquiry did not apportion any official blame to the pilot of the aircraft, Sergeant D R Evans. Although the only surviving record, the Air Ministry Form 1180, indicates that the Court of Inquiry did apparently speculate that Sergeant Evans had **possibly** been flying visually instead of on instruments and had allowed the speed to drop and the aircraft to stall. However, this was not, and could not, be proven and **no** finding of blame was recorded. It was clearly an attempt by the Court to try and offer an explanation for an accident for which no technical or human evidence survived to allow a firmer conclusion to be reached. Eye witnesses reported that one wing of the aircraft was seen to drop and the aircraft went into a steep dive and crashed, with tragic results.

Halifax JP137 was a Halifax II fitted with unmodified rudders. On later marks of Halifax the design of the rudders was altered to correct an inherent problem with the earlier marks – known as rudder overbalancing. The fact that JP 137 was flying with unmodified rudders may well have made recovery of the aircraft, once control had been lost, impossible. Sergeant Evans was, by modern standards, relatively inexperienced, having only some 100 hours of flying with 30 hours on Halifaxes, ten of these at night, but it is extremely doubtful whether even a more experienced pilot could have prevented the crash.

Sadly, we can only conclude that the true cause of the accident will almost certainly never be known. What we can say is that these seven young airmen, all volunteers, died in the service of their country and of freedom, along with the two civilians tragically killed when the aircraft struck their homes, and that none of them were found to be to blame for what was and remains a tragic accident.

I should like to place on record our gratitude to you and the other members of your Committee for your magnificent effort in commemorating their sacrifice by erecting such an elegant and fitting memorial near to the spot where they lost their lives.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Sebastian Cox