

EXPEDITION FIREFLY

At about 7.00 am on a misty March morning in 1942 three naval airmen took off from Abbotsinch air station in their Fairey Firefly fighter aircraft. Their mission was to be a routine anti-submarine patrol over the Western Approaches. The aircraft was heavily laden, carrying, in addition to high octane fuel, its full complement of anti-submarine detection and location instruments, as the screaming engine dragged the reluctant warplane from the rain-swept runway. In order to reach its first positional checkpoint, Ailsa Craig, the Firefly had to climb above the Renfrew Heights which rise, in parts, to over 1200 feet. As the plane rose the mist thickened making instrument flying essential, but over that type of country and in that unstable atmosphere, the instruments were anything but reliable.

At 7.14 am, guided by the navigator's calculations, the pilot descended towards what he believed to be the Firth of Clyde. Seconds later impact occurred, the port wing dug into the soft peat, acted as a fulcrum and swung the plane on to the face of the hillside. The engine severed its mounting and ploughed into the earth twenty yards further on. Petrol from the fractured tanks spilt over the hot exhausts and ignited, the ensuing fire distorting what parts of the wreckage remained intact. The speed at which the accident occurred left the occupants no chance to abandon the aircraft and they were killed instantly.

Last summer a youth who was on holiday in West Kilbride walked over these moors and came upon the wreckage of the aircraft. He informed three of his friends of his discovery and, as a result, when the youth returned for his Easter vacation they trekked the six odd miles to investigate the wreck. Various parts were brought back to school where great interest was shown and, as a result, an " expedition " comprising of a dozen sixth formers trekked to the wreck on Sunday, 5th May, in order to identify the aircraft. The following is an account of their journey to the wreckage and the conclusions they made from their discoveries.

Firstly let it be said that this wreck is in an almost inaccessible part of the moors and consequently an early start had to be made. The route was over Cauldron Hill, a strenuous climb, to the Fairlie Moor Road. From there a course slightly to the east of Kaim Hill was taken and ultimately Green Hill was ascended. The wreck lay at a distance of a hundred yards to the north of the summit of this hill and, after lunch, we set to and literally tore most of the wreckage from the ground where it had sunk slightly into the peat during the years.

The first part of the aircraft to be closely examined was the engine, which lay embedded in the ground about twenty yards from the main wreckage: it was found to be a twelve cylinder engine with the Rolls Royce trade mark inscribed on a plate screwed to the base which was, incidentally, upside down. The engine was what is known as a unilateral engine; that is, the cylinders were in two lines of six mounted in parallel to each other. This was almost certainly an R. R. Griffon engine, which reduced the number of possible aircraft. Our next task was to discover the service which had flown this aircraft. Supporting the theory that it was a naval aircraft were such facts as the discovery of the wireless to which was riveted a plate declaring that the radio had been " accepted by the Navy, June 29th, 1940 "; the discovery of a leading edge of one of the wings which was hinged at a distance of about one third along from the fuselage to enable the aircraft to be parked with as much economy of space as possible; and a button cut from a uniform cuff which bore the anchor emblem of the Fleet Air Arm. We had now narrowed our search to naval fighters post-1940 and powered by an R. R. Griffon engine.

Meanwhile some other interesting objects had been unearthed. These included a Verey pistol, a device used by stranded pilots to attract the attention of rescuers; a navigation light, presumably from the lower side of a wing, from which the lens was duly removed as a " trophy "; the radio mast which was almost two feet long and

which, when in its proper position, had lain at a slight angle to the main fuselage; a small oxygen cylinder which produced a flow of oxygen for a few minutes when the control valve was operated; the quick-release button of a parachute harness, pieces of which were still to be found; two control pedals operated by the feet, and the hand manipulated throttle control for the engine; and anti-glare polaroid spectacles in a crushed case. One of the most exciting finds was a pair of twin cannons which were, unfortunately, too heavy to be removed from the wreckage.

To return to the technical aspect of this account, in the main wreckage were found the fuel tank caps which indicated that the capacity of each of the tanks was one hundred and forty five and a half imperial gallons. A stencil mark reading "Fairey Aviation" gave us the impression that this was a Firefly aircraft which commenced operational duties in early 1942. This theory was strongly supported by the shape of the tail and tailplane elevation. This conclusion is now known to be correct.

It was later discovered that there had been three crewmen aboard but when the rescuers arrived they had been able to extricate only one complete body, which was removed for burial. Of the other two only small parts could be found, these being charred as a result of the fire. The remains were buried near the wrecked aircraft but most of their bodies remained entangled in the wreckage.

Anonymous author, Ardrossan Academy magazine 1957.