

4 Very Brave Young Men

A true story from Cornwall in WW2

Written by Andy Owen



Flight Sergeant John Atkinson, a young RAF pilot from Southern Rhodesia, looked out of the window of the Mess Hall at RAF Portreath - and contemplated the rather daunting flight that he and his three-man crew would be making later that morning.

They had all just finished a hearty plate of bacon and eggs, followed by toast and jam, all washed down with seemingly endless mugs of hot tea.

His crew had left him to finish his breakfast alone, as they had to start preparations for the flight. They were all in excellent spirits.

'Johnnie', as his friends knew him, smiled at their antics this morning, with jokes flying around, together with some bawdy recollections of last night's drinking and carousing in the local pub.

They were a good bunch, he thought. They had all been together for a while - and the chemistry was excellent between them.

Pilot Officer Frank Day was the Observer, with two Wireless Operators/Air Gunners, in Sergeant Charles Taylor and Sergeant John Twelvetrees.

It was July 1942. They were part of the No 1 Overseas Aircraft Delivery Unit and a week before, had flown their Bristol Beaufort Mk2 torpedo bomber - AW288 - down from Scotland to 86 Squadron, based at RAF Portreath, just north of Camborne, in Cornwall.

RAF Portreath was opened as an RAF Fighter Command Sector Station and Overseas Air Dispatch Unit (OADU) on 7th March 1941. Because of its geographical location, it was an ideal departure point for North Africa.

It formed part of 10 Group based at RAF Box at Corsham. Prior to this, the Sector Station had been at St. Eval.

On May 11th 1941, a Fighter Sector Operations Centre was opened at Tehidy Barton Farm, just two miles south west of the airfield.

Soon after, Bristol Blenheim light bombers started to arrive at Portreath and the airfield was used as an advanced base for raids on France.

The station was a bit unusual, in that it had four tarmac runways. The main runway handled bigger, heavier aircraft, whilst the other three were only suitable for single seater fighters. There were twin blast pens and four blister hangars around the perimeter track - and later on, four T2 hangars were added.

At the time that John and his crew were at Portreath, there was a lot going on.

The base was undergoing major changes - the main one being, that 86 Squadron was soon to re-equip with the 4-engined B24 Consolidated Liberators of the US 8th Army Air Force, for maritime patrol duties in the autumn.

So, 86 Squadron were told they were to fly all their Beauforts down to the Med, to make room for these much bigger beasts from the USAAF.

But, all this didn't really interest or bother John and his crew.

They were flying their plane out to Gibraltar this morning. Then, after an overnight stop, they were to fly on to Malta, where the plane would be used to attack the Mediterranean convoys carrying vital supplies to Rommel's Afrika Korps, in North Africa.

They had been given a week's leave in Cornwall after delivering the plane from Scotland - and they had enjoyed it to the full.

The week's rest was well overdue, as they had been very busy during their few months at their previous station - RAF Wick, near John O'Groats.

From March to June 1942, John and his crew flew a total of 8 missions from Wick, including an attack on the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen and a strike mission against the pocket battleship Lutzow.

John was a proud young flyer and part of the Empire's contribution to the 'Mother Country'. He was promoted to Flight Sergeant during his time at Wick - and in a letter to his two sisters in April, had commented:

"I have been with this squadron over two months now and I hope my luck holds. We have been all over the place in that time. I have been promoted to Flight Sergeant, so in future kindly address yours truly as such!"

"I have been with this squadron over two months now and I hope my luck holds. We have been all over the place in that time. I have been promoted to Flight Sergeant, so in future kindly address yours truly as such!"

Cornwall was far removed from Wick, both in weather and in scenery. The stunning beauty of the coves and beaches - and the quaint little towns - had captivated them all.

They particularly enjoyed their visit to St Ives on a beautiful sunny day and spent hours around the town, sampling the unique atmosphere of the place and downing a few pints in the legendary Sloop Inn on the harbour front.

But all this was not in the forefront of John's mind as he looked out of the window.

Anyone looking at him would clearly see the concern he was feeling. Concern that was puzzling to John, just as much as it was worrying.

He couldn't put his finger on why he was feeling the way he was.

At the flight briefing, they had been told that, at take off, they could expect the cloud base to be quite low over the airfield at between 200 - 800 feet with visibility of 3 miles.

The cloud was 2-3,000 feet thick. The surface wind was WSW at 10 knots.

Nothing there to worry about, thought John.

'It'll be a doddle. Of course it will. Snap out of it Atkinson, you silly beggar', he told himself, as he got up and walked out of the Mess Hall.

But, try as he may, this flight bothered John. It had played on his mind for a couple of days - and wouldn't go away.

He hadn't shared his concern with the rest of the crew, but he was uncomfortable.

The aircraft was not one of his favourites. It was a difficult plane to fly and had a very poor accident record. It could be a handful.

In fact, it was exactly that, on the way down from Scotland. But John's skills as a pilot, kept on top of it and he nursed it down to Portreath.

The Bristol Beaufort was a British twin-engined torpedo bomber, designed by the Bristol Aeroplane Company. It had been created as a result of experience gained from designing and building the earlier Blenheim light bomber.

Although it was a heavier twin-engine aircraft and had the Mercury engines of the Blenheim replaced with the more powerful Perseus engines, it lacked the power to fly in a completely controlled manner, if one engine failed.

And that fact alone, caused many crews to consider the plane to be a potential accident waiting to happen.

At the pre-flight briefing, the crew had been informed that the aircraft was heavily laden. An auxiliary fuel tank had been fitted into the bomb bay, as Gibraltar was well over 7 hours flight time away.

The flight was both daunting and hazardous, going across the Bay of Biscay and around the Iberian Peninsula - and the journey was close to the maximum operational range of the aircraft.

The plane was already heavy with fuel and ammunition. Now it had an extra weight to carry.

The way this news was delivered to the crew, inferred that the plane was almost certainly beyond even its wartime maximum take-off weight, although this was never actually voiced.

The crew looked at each other, but said nothing.

John recalled this moment, as he got up to leave.

Shouting 'cheerio' to a couple of new chums just outside the Mess Hall, John walked over to his quarters to collect his gear and literally bumped into the other three as they were coming out. *"Careful Skipper"*, said John Twelvetrees, *"you are going to need us all in tip-top shape for this bloody caper"*.

Everyone laughed. They waited outside and when John joined them, they walked over to their plane, where the ground crew were just finishing their final checks.



The sun made a brief appearance and reflected brightly off the Beaufort. The modifications that had been made to her since their arrival a week ago, were not visible outside, so she looked fit and ready for the long flight ahead.

"All ready to go?" John said to the ground crew chief. *"Yes, Skip, all checks complete. She's full to the brim with fuel and ammo - and ready for you lads to take her down to warmer climes"*.

He slapped the plane with his hand, laughed and said, *"Give Rommel one for me, old girl"*. The crew laughed and Frank Day said, *"She will Chief, she will..."*

As the pilot, John walked around the aircraft and carefully made his own external pre-flight checks. He was very conscious of the long 7-hour duration of the sortie, mostly flying over the sea.

When these were completed, there were handshakes all round and John and his crew then boarded the aircraft.

After running through his detailed cockpit checks, John contacted the control tower for permission to start the engines - and as they both burst into life, the crew started their final pre-flight checks.

The control tower gave permission to taxi, and the plane started to move across the apron.

"Flight Alpha Whisky 288, clear to take off on runway bearing Two three zero Tango".

"Two three zero Tango, Roger,", said John.

"Climb to first track of Two four zero Tango through the cloud".

" Two four zero Tango ", replied John. *"Bon Voyage Alpha Whisky"* was the last message from the tower.

The aircraft took off in a south-westerly direction. It was 08.50 hours.

Four very brave young men had only 5 minutes to live...

What happened next, no one really knows.

But, clearly, the plane once airborne, immediately suffered severe engine trouble.

Either one engine had failed - or was failing.

Many Beaufort aircraft had experienced previous situations like this and pilots knew it was almost impossible to fly this plane on one engine.

And, of course, with a crew of four, a full load of fuel and ammunition, including an extra fuel tank, this particular plane was far too heavy to maintain its altitude, if an engine failed.

John had only one course of action. Return to RAF Portreath immediately.

He turned the plane and began his return.

Unfortunately, the cloud base was low and John knew he almost certainly hadn't got the height to make the runway at Portreath.

As he came out of the cloud, his worst fears were confirmed. He could see RAF Portreath in the distance, but he knew he wasn't going to make it.

He was losing height fast and to his horror, the plane was heading straight for the town of Camborne.

John knew that if he couldn't steer the plane away from its current course, there would be absolute carnage, with potentially hundreds of civilian casualties.

With incredible skill, John fought the controls and turned the plane away from the town. He had spotted an open field and was making for it, to crash land the Beaufort.

He didn't make it.

At 08.55, the plane slammed into a disused chapel at Roscroghan - and John Atkinson, Frank Day, Charles Taylor and John Twelvetrees, died instantly.

The field John was aiming for, was just 300 yards away...

The subsequent RAF accident inquiry report stated that the aircraft was burned out and there was no physical evidence of the cause of the accident, or that any fault that had developed, prior to impact.

Yet, the first locals on the scene, reported that the trees around the chapel, were full of wreckage, clothing and other items. A shoe was found in one of the trees. Bits of the aircraft wreckage were all down the sides of the lane and the two engines were in the road to Tehidy.

The front fuselage faced the road and stuck up clearly.

Clearly, the severe impact of the crash, broke the Beaufort up into many parts, but there were no reports of the plane exploding and burning on impact, which is surprising, given the amount of fuel and munitions on board.

It appears that certain parts of the plane were on fire on the ground, but that is all.

It seems to me, that given that it was 1942 and so much was happening, there was no appetite from the RAF to spend time on this accident. Sadly, aircraft losses from combat and accidents were heavy.

We were at war. And people die.

Putting the pieces together after all this time, it is almost impossible to come to a clear conclusion as to why these brave men died.

However, in my view, some key elements played a part in this.

The Beaufort itself was an unreliable aircraft. It had a long record of engine issues. If one engine failed, in most instances, the other engine had insufficient power for asymmetric flight. If AW288 was over the permitted weight limit, which looks very likely - and the engine issue had struck minutes after take off - then this plane was coming down.

And quickly.

Which, very sadly, is what happened.

What must never be forgotten about this story, is the bravery of these four extraordinary young men. They gave their lives to save the people of Camborne.

If this plane, heavily laden with fuel and ammunition, had come down in the town, it would probably have caused the deaths of hundreds of local people.

In their terrifying last moments, they all knew this.

And they made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure it didn't happen.

Quite rightly, a memorial service is held every year in Camborne - and in 2012, a new memorial stone was erected at the site of the crash.

It's a fitting tribute to four very brave young men.

