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AVIATION ARCHAEOLOGY

by Cyril Richardson

Intrigued though I am by the tale about the German airman, referred to in *Smoke Signal No 27*, I support the view that the truth may never be known. The crash of a Junkers Ju88 and that of a Hurricane from RAF Kemble is of course entirely different and relates to an incident which occurred on 25 July 1940. Nevertheless, it has a local connection which readers might be interested in.

On that particular day, a lone Ju88, laden with two 250kg bombs, was heading for the Brockworth works of the Gloster Aircraft Company, when it was intercepted by a Hawker Hurricane based at Kemble and flown by Pilot Officer Charles Alec Bird. In the ensuing engagement, P/O Bird's aircraft collided with the Ju88, which crashed at Oakridge near Chalford. Sadly, P/O Bird, aged 23, was killed, as was the Junkers flight engineer.

The other four German crew members landed safely by parachute and became prisoners-of-war. During his descent, the observer lost his right flying boot. This item, together with a 'quick release' panel from the Ju88, reposes in the archives of the Gloucestershire Aviation Collection, along with a photograph of P/O Bird and the flying goggles he is said to have been wearing. He is buried in the churchyard of Adel in Yorkshire and his gravestone bears this inscription:

*He has wings, for as the plane dived deep,
His spirit, free within the realms of space,
On new found wings, flew with a swifter sweep,
Fearless and laughing, to the Throne of Grace .*

The inscription is taken from a poem entitled 'Wings' which P/O Bird and his wife found in a bookshop here in Cheltenham only the day before he met his death. The poem, whose author is identified only by the initials "ACL", is reproduced in John Rennison's book *Wings Over Gloucestershire*.

All these years later, it is a sobering thought that by sacrificing his own life, Charles Alec Bird may well have saved the lives of many of the work force at the Brockworth site, some of whom were residents of the Leckhampton area.

More immediately relevant to our own locality was a fatal mid-air collision over Cheltenham on 11 February 1942 between a De Havilland Tiger Moth flown from the Flying Instructors' School at Staverton and a Miles Master of the Flying Training School, Hullavington. The wreckage of the Tiger Moth came to earth

near Parkward Mansions adjacent to the Shurdington Road-Moorend Park Road junction. The collision was witnessed by John Dance, then a member of 537 (Cheltenham Grammar School) Squadron, Air Training Corps, who watched as the Master dived towards the Tiger Moth, in what he thinks was a mock attack which went horribly wrong.

Having received a direct hit by a German bomb on the night of 11 December 1940, Parkward mansions was again in the forefront of wartime activity. Oh that a photograph of the crash scene would come to light!

References : *Stroud News & Journal* , Feb 7 1985; *Action Stations 5* by Chris Ashworth and *Wings Over Gloucestershire* by John Rennison.