



The Freckleton Disaster - B-24 42-50291 - 23rd August 1944

Updated 13.10.2001

NOTE: Due to the nature of this incident and the considerable in-depth research we have carried out over the years into ascertaining the true facts behind it, this page is, by necessity, longer than we would normally place on this site and to reduce download time, thumbnail illustrations have been used which may be clicked on to view larger copies of the images and more detailed captions. However, this incident continues to arouse much feeling locally and since we set up this website, we have had a number of email enquiries concerning it from further afield. We therefore felt it appropriate to include much of the original source material in the text, in order that readers might better understand the sequence of events on that terrible day in the summer of 1944.

Type	Unit	Base	Duty	Crew
B-24H	ex 490th Bombardment Group, US 8th AAF	BAD 2, Warton	Test Flight	3

The Roll of Honour of Civilian War Dead in Westminster Abbey records the names of 45 men, women, and children killed when a B-24 Liberator bomber fell on the village of Freckleton during August 1944, demolishing a number of buildings, including part of the school. The true toll, including British and American air force personnel caught up in the destruction, was that a total of 61 people in fact perished in this incident which ranks as probably the worst air accident in Britain during the Second World War.



Before the disaster: Left, Holy Trinity School and right, Whittle's "Sad Sack" Snack Bar.

At 10.30 hours on the morning of Wednesday August 23rd, 1944 B-24 Liberator H-20 42-50291 was cleared for take-off from Warton's runway 08. 291', an ex-490th Bomb Group machine, "CLASSY CHASSIS II" had been brought to the U.S.A.A.F.'s huge Base Air Depot 2 for refurbishment prior to being allocated to the 2nd Combat Division. On this day, she was being test-flown before resuming service and this task fell to 1st Lieutenant John Bloemendal, one of BAD 2's regular test pilots, with T/Sgt Jimmie Parr as co-pilot and Sgt Gordon Kinney as flight engineer. The take-off was uneventful and the B-24 headed out over the Lancashire countryside, accompanied by a second B-24, 42-1353 being test flown by 1st Lieutenant Pete Manassero. Over the radio, Bloemendal called Manassero's attention to the cloud formation towards the South-South-East. It was a very impressive sight and looked like a "thunderhead" according to Manassero.



Bloemendal &
Parr (to the
left) 1st Lt. John
Bloemendal

Less than five minutes after the B-24 left Warton a telephone call reached the base from BAD 1, Burtonwood, warning of a violent storm approaching the Preston area and immediately an order was issued recalling both Bloemendal's aircraft and that being flown by 1st Lieutenant Pete Manassero.

Control Tower - *"Hello Gorgeous John and Gorgeous Peter, this is [Faram] control, are you receiving. Over".*

Answer - *"Hello [Faram] control. This is Gorgeous John - Over".*

Control Tower - *"Hello Gorgeous John and Gorgeous Peter, this is [Faram] control. You are to land immediately. Over",*

Answer - *"Hello [Faram] control. This is Gorgeous John. Can you give the reason? Is it the weather?"*

Control Tower - *"Roger Gorgeous John, that is correct. Ceiling and visibility decreasing rapidly. You are clear and No.1 to land on Runway 08."*

Answer - *"Gorgeous John. Roger, [Faram] control. - END -*

By the time the two B-24's arrived back over Warton, the storm was at its height. Witnesses relate the rain was so heavy that it was impossible to see across the road. The storm assumed proportions of an almost supernatural quality; thunder and lightning rolled across the sky and the wind was of such ferocity as to uproot trees and smash hen cabins on a nearby farm. The sky turned an ominous black, and the whole district was plunged into darkness even though it was a midsummers day, making it impossible to see indoors without the aid of artificial light. A contemporary local newspaper reported a trail of destruction across the North-West; Hutton Meteorological Station, which was fairly clear of the storm on the other side of the river, recorded wind velocity of nearly 60 m.p.h., with water spouts being observed in the Ribble estuary, and flash flooding in Southport and Blackpool. Although the official report states that no further radio contact was made by Bloemendal with Control, radio conversations monitored by Warton's tower indicated that the two B-24 pilots had abandoned their attempts to land and were heading North to hold clear until the storm abated:

- Manassero was flying on Bloemendal's right wing approximately 100 yards away - Lt Manassero: "As we drew near the field, I drew further out to be in position to land (as) number two. We let down to 500 feet and about four miles North-West of the field' we encountered rain and it became heavier with less visibility as we neared the approach to Runway 08. On the base leg position Lt Bloemendal let down his gear (sic) and I did the same. Shortly after this I lost sight of Bloemendal's aircraft. As I flew over Lytham, I started a left turn to start the approach. At this time I heard Lt Bloemendal notify "Faram" that he was pulling up the wheels and going around (this transmission recorded at Control as being between the two aircraft). I was then over the wash (sic) and could not see the ground and had to fly on instruments. I then called Lt Bloemendal and told him we had better head North and get out of the storm. He answered "OK". I then told him I would take a heading of about 330 degrees...He said "Roger." That was the last I heard from Lt. Bloemendal. I flew about four or five minutes on a heading of about 330 degrees before breaking out of the storm. I then called Lt Bloemendal and asked if he was OK, and did not get a reply."

At this point Flying Control at Warton tower records sending out a general call instructing all aircraft to steer North of the field and await a recall notification after the storm had passed. Lt. Manassero is recorded as having verified this call, but no reply was received from Lt. Bloemendal - almost certainly it was already too late.



Photos taken in the initial aftermath of the crash clearly show the scale of the disaster on the village, as rescuers search amongst the wreckage and rubble for survivors.



Eyewitness accounts from the recently released U.S.A.A.F. Aircraft Mishap Reports - taken over the two days following the crash - illustrate the last moments of the B-24. Like almost everyone else in Freckleton, they were all watching the storm:

- Charlotte Allsup was at the back of her house, at "Poplars", getting her chickens out of the rain on Clitheroes Lane, Freckleton. "I looked in a Northerly direction, the storm was at it's fiercest, rain was teeming down-I saw a ball of fire in the sky flash then hit the plane-the plane spun down and hit the earth. The ball of fire was lightning."
- Vera Cartmell was standing in the window of her house at 30, Kirkham Road, Freckleton, looking at the storm with her two year old daughter June when she saw the Liberator. "It was flying so low I felt it would crash. I tried to follow it but couldn't see it anymore. I heard the crash however and then saw the flames. The plane was not on fire when I saw it flying. I could only see it between the two buildings opposite my house, No's 19 and 17 Kirkham Road."
- Across the road, a visitor at Number 21, eight-year-old Eric Greenwood was stood at the window looking towards the fields. "I saw the Liberator and heard its roar right over the house. It was flying very low and I saw the right wing go down as the left came up. It seemed to be swaying in the air. I saw no flames. A moment afterwards I heard a crash."



Initial point of impact & damage along the path taken by the stricken B-24 from the official enquiry

The B-24's fate was sealed; already flying low to the ground with it's wings now near vertical, the B-24 ripped the top off a tree, shed it's right wingtip as it chopped off the corner of a building, leaving the rest of the wing ploughing along the ground through a hedge. The 25-ton bomber carried on, partly demolishing three houses and the "The Sad Sack" Snack Bar, it's momentum continuing, taking it across Lytham Road and finally ending as it disintegrated in the crash. Part of the plane destroyed the infants wing of Freckleton Holy Trinity School and the whole area erupted into a sea of flames as the fuel from the ruptured tanks ignited. The clock in one classroom stopped at 10.47 a.m.

- William Banks was working at Freckleton Post Office, and was also looking out to the West immediately after the crash actually occurred; "I saw the tail of the plane in the centre of the road in front of the School - it looked like a lorry. As I was looking, almost instantaneously the School, highway and plane burst into flames. This was preceded by a vivid flash of lightning. This happened at the most severest part of the thunderstorm. I went to the fire, but the heat was too intense to get close."

- Mrs S.J. Rocky was in the Electrical Showroom of St.Annes Corporation, on the opposite side of the road to the School. After hearing the aircraft and a loud noise, which she thought was lightning and thunder. "I opened the door and looked out. The street was aflame-I could see Whittles Bar (Sad Sack) aflame-I couldn't see the School because of the fire, but I could hear the children screaming."



Fires fed by the plane's fuel burned long after the crash as the rescue effort turned into a search for victims bodies.

Back at Warton Control tower a C-47 parked in area "#6" of the airfield radiod in a report of a column of black smoke visible to the North east. In the village rescuers soon converged on the scene from every direction; mostly Americans from the adjoining Base Air Depot but also the National Fire Service and stunned Freckleton villagers. Predictably there was much confusion initially as they were confronted by a scene of utter devastation, rubble from demolished buildings together with shattered sections of the stricken aircraft and burning fuel running down Lytham Road.

- Private Morton T. Kitchen of 2223 Quartermaster Truck Company, was riding in the front seat of a truck heading towards Freckleton to Site 13. The lightning was so severe and the rain so heavy that the driver had to look around the windshield to see. Trucks were going past with their lights on, at 15 miles per hour. "There was some more lightning and a glow that I thought was a sheet of lightning very low and flat which died out almost immediately. When we were just past the gate at Site 10, I saw a fire on the left side of the road. We hurried closer and the driver pulled up on the sidewalk between the drive entrance to Site 12 and the fire. We went to the fire but only had a small fire extinguisher which was then of no value. An R.A.F. man was lying and trying to crawl away from near the plane. The driver and myself pulled him back to where it was safe. Water and burning gasoline was all around the place."



The Aftermath: left and centre, the school and right, the Snack Bar.

Just as suddenly as it began, the severest thunderstorm the Base - and many of the villagers - had ever experienced, was gone. From the smouldering remains of the infants classroom only three youngsters emerged alive, 35 children and two teachers having died. Those sheltering from the storm in the "Sad Sack Snack Bar" stood no chance as the building took the full force of the impact and rescuers found the bodies of six U.S.A.A.F. and four R.A.F. personnel along with several civilians amongst the debris. Several of the more seriously injured victims died during the following week and when the formal inquest into the tragedy opened on September 8th 1944, the total death toll was 61.



Sgt. (Pilot) W.W. Cannell

- Sergeant (Pilot) W.W. Cannell was one of six RAF aircrew in the Sad Sack cafe when the B-24 struck. Four of

them were killed, and two injured. All were members of 22 Aircrew Handling Unit (22 A.H.U.), a holding unit for aircrew at RAF Kirkham. Sgt Cannell was billeted in the (now long demolished) domestic site on the opposite side of the road to the main camp at RAF Kirkham (now an Open Prison). The food at RAF Kirkham, it seems, might not have been up to much: - in what was to be his last letter home to the Isle of Man, Sgt Cannell wrote: "There is a very nice little cafe near here which sells lovely breakfasts. I often stay in bed and miss breakfast (R.A.F.) then get up and scrounge off after parade and go there. Bacon and real eggs, toast and marmalade. Very tasty! Very sweet!" For Sgt Cannell and his comrades, this sweet tooth proved tragically fatal.

The majority of the child victims along with Miss Jenny Hall, a teacher and local girl who had arrived at the Freckleton School only the day before the accident, as well as a number of civilians killed in "The Sad Sack" Snack Bar, were buried in a communal grave in the village's Holy Trinity Churchyard. The American authorities bearing the cost of the mass burial and Brigadier General Isaac W. Ott, commander of BAD 2 Warton, was ordered to represent the U.S.A.A.F. at the elaborate funeral ceremony. Almost immediately a memorial fund was set up with the intention of building a memorial hall to commemorate the victims of the catastrophe. The three U.S. aircrew killed in the B-24 were buried in a U.S. Cemetery in the South of England; after the war, their remains were returned for reburial in their home states in the USA at the request of their next of kin.



The funeral and the scale of the tragedy becomes apparent.

Casualty List:

Name	Location/Position	Status
1st Lt. John A. Bloemendal,	B-24, 42-5029/Pilot	K.
T/Sgt James M. Parr	B-24, 42-5029/Co-Pilot	K.
Sgt Gordon W. Kinney	B-24, 42-5029/Flight Engineer	K.
4 RAF Personnel	"Sad Sack" Snack Bar/Customers	K.
7 USAAF Personnel	"Sad Sack" Snack Bar/Customers	K.
7 Civilians	"Sad Sack" Snack Bar/Staff & Customers	K.
2 Adults	Holy Trinity School/Teachers	K.
38 Children	Holy Trinity School/Pupils	K.
<u>Note: For a full listing of all the names of those who lost their lives Click Here.</u>		



Memorial garden and playground.

From the start the memorial fund set up by the village Parish council ran into controversy, a situation which sadly continues to the present day, though here is not the place to dwell on such matters. Suffice to say that the proposed memorial hall was finally built and opened in September 1977. The American servicemen from BAD 2 also sought to place a fitting memorial in the village and set to work transforming an area of land, which had been purchased by the town council in 1927 and was close to the school, into a memorial garden and appropriately a children's playground. The US servicemen raised the money for the equipment on the playground, which was dedicated in August 1945, with

a stone tablet bearing the inscription: "This playground presented to the children of Freckleton by their neighbours of Base Air Depot No. 2 USAAF in recognition and remembrance of their common loss in the disaster of August 23rd 1944"



Map drawn up by local police constable for the board of inquiry showing path taken by the B-24 with accompanying photo looking back along the same with the broken tree [arrowed] showing first point of impact.

The official report into the crash summarised that the exact cause was unknown, though it was the opinion of the Investigating committee that the pilot made an error in his judgement of the violence of the storm. They concluded that Lt. Bloemendal had not fully realised the danger until he made his approach to land, by which time he had insufficient altitude and speed to manoeuvre given the violent winds and downdrafts he must have encountered during his attempt to withdraw from the area. It was also thought possible that structural failure may have occurred in the extreme conditions, though it was noted that the aircraft was so completely destroyed as to make any such investigation impossible. Finally it was recommended that pilots trained in the United States and then being sent to England, should be emphatically warned about the dangers of British thunderstorms. It was noted that many such pilots believed that British storms were little more than showers compared to those encountered in the Southern United States and saw no danger in them, whereas they could be every bit as dangerous though much less frequent.



Freckleton village today: Left, the site of the school and right, looking across Lytham road to the site of the Snack Bar

The photographs accompanying this feature need few captions; the pictures speak for themselves. Though much of this account was compiled using an official wartime USAAF document, the personal loss suffered by so many in the village is still apparent. Yet other details not mentioned further compounded the loss suffered by some - one Freckleton woman, who suffered the loss of her daughter, received a telegram only six days later informing her that her husband had been killed serving with the East Lancashire regiment in France, having arrived there shortly after D-Day - he would have been thirty years old on the day his daughter was killed. The village policeman, P.C. Robert Nelson, knew most of the children personally - he was asked to cut off locks of hair from some of the victims, for parents to keep as mementoes - it affected him deeply and he was never the same man afterwards. The older children who were fortunate to be in another part of the school when the disaster struck, were also deeply shocked and found it difficult to return to school - for some it was to be months before they felt able to cope with returning to their lessons. It is hard to comprehend, today in another century, how such appalling tragedy and suffering could happen in a small Lancashire village - For the rest of the country it had been a day of rejoicing - Paris had been liberated, and the much longed for victory was finally in sight.



The communal grave in Holy Trinity Churchyard today The original school date stone. Preserved at the new School.

Acknowledgements: Russell Brown, the late David G. Mayor, [BAD 2 Association](#), Peter Moran, Wally Foreman, Liberator Association, the late Edward A. Cannell, [Craig Fuller](#), Paul Lomax, L.A.I.T.

***Author's Note:** Over the years there has been much conjecture as to the causes of this disaster, with differing versions of events becoming established, some perhaps based on recollections passed on secondhand or dimmed by the years. No doubt the dreadful confusion immediately following the crash gave rise, to those who were present, forming strong beliefs as to what had happened from what they saw. Other evidence, such as claimed mysterious radio transmissions from the stricken plane (which are not recorded in the official report), are more difficult to explain/substantiate and have been left out. We have tried as far as possible to stick to the known facts using primary source material for this account and apologise for any inaccuracies or omissions which may have crept in - Please feel free to email any comments to the address below.*



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