

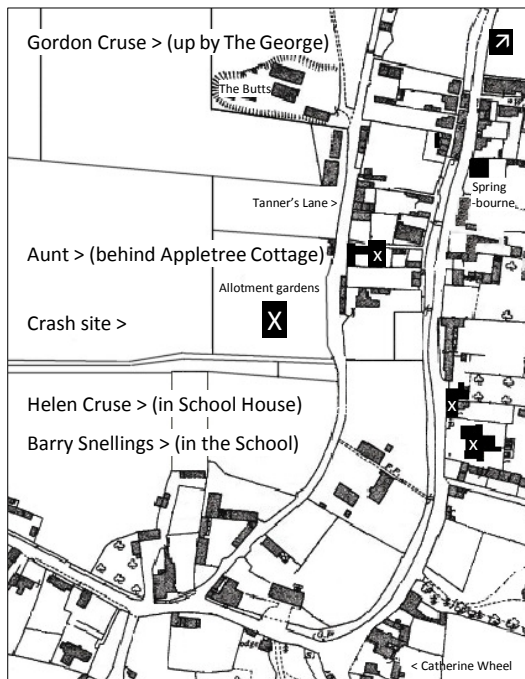
‘Spitfire crashed at Shrewton...’

(from the Operational Record Book of No 118 Squadron, RAF, 1500 hrs 16/12/41)

Gordon Cruse – who lived in Appletree Cottage in Tanner’s Lane, recalls: *‘I had closed the newspaper shop, where Billy Baxter’s now is, gone home for tea and a sandwich, changed into rough clothes, and was on my way to my father’s smallholding, where the pig farm now is on London Road. It was spring-like weather, fit for wearing a woolie rather than a coat.*

I was half way up the hill when I heard aircraft and looked up. There was a formation of them, coming from Tilshead direction, when one suddenly fell down, somersaulted in the air. It fell away, then came back up, like a Victory roll, and came in over the village at an angle.

I jumped on my bike and rushed back to Tanner’s Lane, where my family lived.



A simplified extract from the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map, 1939, reproduced with the permission of the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Centre, Chippenham

My aunt, Mrs Kitty Lickard, was drawing water from the well at the back of Appletree Cottage when she saw it go past. She saw the pilot in it and thought it was going to hit the chimney of the cottage. But it went into the ground at the top of the allotments.

I grabbed a spade, thinking I could help dig the pilot out, and rushed up towards the crash. The tail plane of the aircraft was sticking up from the ground, and there was no crater.

I ran up the path that that used to go up to the allotments, when PC Joe Stretch, the village bobby, stopped me. He said “You can put that spade back, sonny. You can’t do anything for him now.” He had come across from the old police house, by Springbourne in the High Street.

Within an hour the RAF were there and not long after had erected screens around the crash and people were kept away. A Queen Mary trailer was parked in Tanner’s Lane for several days, alongside my family home and near the dairy, where the lorries that went out to the farms to collect milk parked. The RAF was there for several days.

There was no explosion or flames, it was just buried in the

ground – which was quite soft, being allotments – up to the level of the cockpit.

Our house was 100 yards away, up Tanner’s Lane. The centre of the crash was at the top of the allotments, in Ashley Smith’s patch, which he rented from G R Smith.’

Helen Brown – she married Gordon Cruse in 1943 during his embarkation leave – was nanny to Derek, son of Mr Elderkin, the schoolmaster and a Major in the Home Guard, and she was in the first floor nursery in School House, beside the old Shrewton School building.

She remembers: *‘It was early afternoon and I was looking out of the window, preparing to take Derek out for a walk. I was thinking, “Oh, it’s lovely, a warm, very sunny day, we won’t need coats”, when I heard the sound of one or more aircraft. It, or they, was coming from the Elston or Laundry end of the village, where the Rec now is. The Spitfire did what looked like a Victory roll and, when it came out of the roll, went up for a short distance, turned over and dived down. It looked to me as if was going to land on the cottages, where Gordon’s family lived, but it crashed into the ground, just about where Mr Munday’s house now is.*

I didn’t see the crash itself, that was hidden from me. But it went straight in.



I went out with the boy on our walk. At the British Legion end of Tanner's Lane was another policeman, who stopped us from going up the lane. The whole village was quiet, virtually nobody about, they were all at work. There was no sign of fire or flames at the crash.'

Later: *'Gordon told me that the aircraft had had its wings folded back against the fuselage, with only the tail plane visible. He also said that it was not a tangled wreck. As there was no explosion I guess this was why there was no crater. Afterwards it was rumoured that the pilot was a Polish airman.*

The public were kept away from the site and lifting gear came in to remove the wreckage.'

Barry Snellings – who now lives in Australia, remembers sitting, aged about 9, in Shrewton School, *'in the classroom, facing towards the Headmaster's house. There was always a lot of military and aircraft activity in those days and I was keen on planes. I heard a very loud engine noise, it was getting louder and louder very quickly.*

I looked out of the window, expecting to see a low level fly past. Instead it came across the top part of the Gothic window, at 45 degrees, just that fleeting second. He was silhouetted in the cockpit against the sky. It seemed to me he was struggling with something. It was over in a flash and it is something that has stuck in my mind ever since.

Barry did not remember any smoke or flames after the crash. However, he did say: *'we weren't allowed out of school after the crash. The windows have a very high sill level and we couldn't peer over.*

There was no sign of flames when it flashed past the window, but I just saw the cockpit level. The impression I got was that he was conscious at that point, but it could have been vibration, it could have been anything. It was all so quick.'



So what had happened? For years after the crash the village was alive with rumours: it was a Spitfire, the pilot was Polish, he had died, his body was unrecovered... and so it went on. Even in 2011 the story remained unclear. But now, by combining eye-witness accounts with research at RAF Hendon, the National Archives, the help of an 1939 map and some metal detecting we have been able to piece it together. Some of this is conjecture, and two tantalising pieces of evidence are missing, but we are sure this is close to what happened...

Ronald Boswell Birtles was born on 16 November 1916 at King's Heath in Birmingham and became a post office engineer. In 1940 he married Doreen Bennett at St Laurence's Church, Rowington, Warwickshire – where he is buried, marked by a Commonwealth

War Graves headstone. His son was born two months later, and his grandson Cymon Birtles confirmed much of his grandfather's story.

By 1941 he was in 118 Squadron RAF, flying Spitfires Mark V's from Ibsley in Hampshire; the airfield is now a flooded quarry but its control tower still exists. Their *Operations Record Book* that autumn shows the squadron on training ('aerobatics'), test firing cannon, on army co-operation flights, convoy protection patrols over the Channel, scrambles to intercept enemy raids and conducting fighter sweeps over northern France. In December the ORB notes Birtles receiving seven days privilege leave, his promotion from Sergeant Pilot to Flight Sergeant and, on 9 December, his winning the Distinguished Flying Medal.

Tuesday 16 December was just another such day. The squadron conducted ten flights with 30 aircraft, a shipping recce, a flight scramble and, in the mid-afternoon, aerobatics training. Just before three o'clock the squadron, led by Wing Commander Ian 'Widge' Gleed, described as 'a dynamic leader', was over Tilshead, flying south across Salisbury Plain and climbing towards 30,000 feet. Boscombe Down's historical weather data shows *'Fair to fine, 50°, bright and sunny, very mild for the time of year. A slight breeze, although one gust of 26 mph. 3/10ths cloud [i.e. very little].'* Then, the ORB records, *'F/Sgt Birtles DFM, in Spitfire AB 977, when at 24,000 feet suddenly dived down out of control and crashed at Shrewton at 1500 hours. Pilot was killed, aircraft burst into flames and burnt out Category E2 [scrap]. Cause of accident unknown and being investigated by court of Enquiry.'*

Peter Wallis, a former RAF pilot, has created the following scenario of what probably happened on that fateful flight: *'From what we've read, the evidence of witnesses and talking to a former colleague, a test pilot who has*

flown Spitfires and done a lot of high speed flight, we think the sequence of events was this: it's likely that as Birtles entered the climb, in formation with the other aircraft, his oxygen was not working. He probably started to become hypoxic as he went up through 10,000 feet. Hypoxia leads to slight over-confidence, there is no feeling that you are feeling poorly, if anything exactly the opposite. That's the way it works.

As he climbed it would have got worse, the hypoxia coming on, gradually, gradually, very gradually, from 10,000 feet, it was not an instant thing. But at 24,000 feet he became unconscious. The Spitfire would have been trimmed for a 160-180 knot climb at climbing power, a high power setting. You set the trims on the aircraft for a relatively low speed and the energy that you're getting from the engine is why you are climbing.

When he became unconscious the aircraft became unstable, but it was still trimmed for 160-180 knots. So the aircraft descended in a series of large rotational spirals, sometimes upside down and, as he was trimmed for a climb, the speed then increased. As he came to the bottom of the spiral the speed would drop off, with the engine still at full power. Once below 10,000 feet, if he had started to recover, his G tolerance (to manoeuvre) would have been reduced, so he'd have been, if not unconscious, then in an extremely confused state.

So, he was spiralling down and, near Shrewton, he was seen in a sort of "Victory roll." He was coming out of this and then the aircraft went whizzing past the school at an angle of about 45 degrees, with rising ground ahead. He was probably completely unconscious when he hit the ground. Four other Spitfires were reported to have followed him down, they would have been trying to see what was happening, and would have observed the crash.

The aircraft, of course, apart from the oxygen problem, was fully serviceable, there was nothing wrong with it. If he had been able to avoid things then he would have been able to pull out of the dive and fly it away. So I don't think the idea that he was "avoiding the village" is really a starter, and any "movement" of his head and shoulders would have simply been from the motions of his unconscious body being buffeted about in the cockpit.'

The RAF's Court of Enquiry would have been held at Ibsley within days of the crash, but searches at the National Archives in Kew, the RAF Museum at Hendon and the MOD's Air Historical Branch have failed to find its report. It may be that it still exists and has not yet been released, or it may be that it was lost from RAF Hendon in the 1970's.

The body of Ron Birtles was recovered within 24 hours and he was buried just before Christmas Day at his church in the West Midlands. The wrecked aircraft was removed within a week of the crash by a Coles Crane of the local RAF Maintenance Unit – an 'MU' – along with some 99% of its scattered remains. These were taken away on a Queen Mary trailer (its nickname was a comparison with the ocean going liner, as they were so lengthy). Sadly the Maintenance Unit salvage reports cannot be found in RAF records or at Kew.

In the 1950's the allotment gardens were subdivided, council houses being built alongside Tanner's Lane while the rest reverted to agriculture. Over the years tiny remains of the crashed aircraft have been found in the back gardens and in the adjoining field. With the permission of the landowner, the site of the crash has been swept with a high resolution metal detector. The two largest recent finds are shown below, but other finds have ranged in length from half an inch to two inches, including a small, curved, piece of alloy with flecks of black paint on it, believed to have come from the super-charger on the Rolls Royce Merlin engine (which all left the factory painted gloss black). Two other finds may have been a small valve from the Spitfire's engine and a shard of Plexiglass from the cockpit canopy. The RAF's *Battle of Britain Memorial Flight* has been asked to help identify them.



Two pieces of aluminium – or Duralumin alloy – found off Tanner's Lane. Left: a thin wafer probably from the 'skin' of the Spitfire. Right: a much thicker piece, about 5 inches long, melted in the intense heat of the post-crash burning of the Spitfire's aviation fuel. In its middle is a rusted steel rod, around which Duralumin was rolled to strengthen curved opening parts, such as the engine cover

There are no police, fire brigade or ARP records of this incident and, to protect national security and civilian morale, air crashes were rarely reported in the press. The best records are the squadron's *Operational Record Book*, quoted above, and the three eyewitness recollections of Gordon and Helen Cruse, and Barry Snelling, published last month.

In the 1970's a man called at one of the houses in Tanner's Lane, close to the scene of the crash. He had a map of the site of the crash and a photograph, looking south from the edge of The Butts. The aircraft had been removed, but the Coles Crane and Queen Mary trailer were clearly visible, with several military personnel around the crash site. Unfortunately the map and photo were only glimpsed, but it is possible that they were from the RAF Court of Enquiry's report, or were part of the Maintenance Unit's salvage report. The unknown caller may have been in one of the many air crash archaeology groups which sprang up in the 1970's as a result of the '30 year rule' (i.e. when many official records from world war two were released). Most such societies in the south of England have now folded up and are untraceable, but if anyone has any clue about this unknown caller, or where copies of that map or photograph might now be, please do contact the authors of this article!

We hope this short piece forms a fitting tribute to Ronald Birtles, the citation for whose DFM demonstrates that he was quite a hero. It is hoped a fuller version, with more photos, will end up on the internet. If you have more information about the pilot, 118 Squadron, or the crash then please contact the authors via the editor of Arrowhead.

A small and quite poignant detail to end with... in 1940 Ron Birtles' mother had kept a small model aeroplane from her son's wedding cake. She told a local newspaper in the West Midlands how, 'Just before he was killed, I was dusting the mantelpiece and was horrified to see that the aeroplane had fallen on to the floor and smashed to pieces.'

Acknowledgements

Richard Essberger and Peter Wallis wish to thank John Tarrant, Peter and Margaret Bryden and David Munday for their assistance, Richard Green for the loan of his metal detector and Tracy Green for operating it, Solent Sky Museum – www.spitfireonline.co.uk – for permission to reproduce the squadron photo, to the staff at RAF Museum Hendon, National Archives, MOD Air Historical Branch, the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Centre and English Heritage for their help, and especially Gordon and Helen Cruse and Barry Snelling for their accounts. And we apologise if we have failed to contact anyone else who witnessed the crash.