



SOUTH WALES POLICE
MUSEUM

The Llandow Air Disaster March 1950



The History of Policing in Wales

The Llandow Air Disaster

March 1950

The Tragedy

The tragic air crash at Llandow on Sunday 12th March 1950 was formerly regarded as the world's worst air disaster.

At 3.05pm on that fateful day, PC 578 John Davies was on duty at the airfield at RAF Llandow.

He was waiting for the Dublin to Llandow airliner 'The Star Girl', which was carrying 78 triumphant Welsh supporters from Saturday's rugby international match in Ireland. The game resulted in Wales winning the Triple Crown.

PC Davies noticed that the aircraft was approaching runway 28 at an abnormally low altitude from the North-East with the air-carriage down.

This rapid loss of height evidently concerned the pilot. At a third of a mile from the runway, and 150-200 feet above the ground, he increased the revolution of the engines in a bid to maintain height.

The aircraft gained speed and height steadily at first, but then it began to climb steeply at an almost vertical angle, causing the engines to stall.

The plane fell sharply to starboard and plunged to the ground, narrowly missing a farm and a couple of young boys playing football.

The starboard wing-tip hit first, followed by the nose of the craft and then the port-wing, which snapped off. The aircraft skewed in a clockwise direction before coming to rest at the edge of a field beside Park Farm



The wreckage of the AVRO Tudor Airliner

in Sigginston near Llandow, approximately 200 yards from the boundary of the RAF Station where it had intended to land.

The engines had throttled back prior to impact, so there was a split second of silence before a dull, heart-stopping thud.

First Actions of the Police

A stunned PC Davies immediately informed Llantwit Police Station from the Control Tower telephone and then proceeded on bicycle to the wreckage of the aircraft.

He found a scene of indescribable chaos. The front part of the plane was stuck in the ground. The central section was a wreck with both wings ripped off and the fuselage completely destroyed, but the tail, although damaged, was still intact.

The bulk of the 78 passengers and five crew members were huddled in a mass in the fore part of the wreckage. Most were still strapped in their seats, which had been ripped away from their moorings by the force of the impact and piled in a mass.

Incredibly, in the midst of such carnage, two passengers who had not been seriously injured in the crash climbed out from a gap in the fabric of the aircraft and walked unaided over to Park Farm.

They were not the last people to board the plane at Dublin, but had chosen to sit in adjacent seats in the tail to get a better view. This decision had saved their lives.

A third man who survived the crash had been feeling ill during the flight, so moved to a seat at the back of the plane so he could compose himself. His original seat in the middle section of the plane was then occupied by another passenger, prohibiting any return and saving his life.

Eight other passengers were brought out alive, but all succumbed to their injuries, either in the ambulances or at the RAF hospitals.

When interviewed, the survivors spoke of their surprise at the silence of the passengers as the plane



Excited passengers board the ill-fated airliner for Dublin

crashed. There had been no screaming, shouting or even general conversation.

Many of those who died had been flying for the first time and were tired from the excitement of the trip. It would appear that the majority may not even have comprehended the danger until the final seconds.

PC Davies's immediate response was to begin to move the dead out of the plane, but when he noticed passenger's personal possessions had been strewn around the crash area, he took it upon himself to take charge of property instead.

This included small attaché cases, handbags, clothing, shoes, tinned food together with gifts of cigarettes, and Easter eggs for loved ones.

All property was conveyed in a RAF vehicle to Llantwit Station, and handed over to the care of Detective Sergeant Jones of Barry Dock. Personal literature and documents relating to the crew were passed to Inspector Bowen for safe-keeping.

Sergeant Job Davies was one of 44 police officers that arrived at the scene from Police Headquarters at Bridgend, Barry Dock and Cowbridge within half an hour on the crash. 12 more officers were stationed at Cowbridge on stand-by.

Sergeant Davies had the presence of mind to create a wide gap in the hedge abutting the roadway, allowing easy access to the crash scene by 35 ambulances and 12 fire fighters. Such quick thinking undoubtedly increased the chances of survival for those who had been seriously injured.

The Role of the Police

The Glamorgan Constabulary, under the command of Chief Constable Joseph Jones, quickly and efficiently took control.

Officers were deployed to a range of duties. These included assisting the emergency services in removing the bodies from the wreckage and placing them in

ambulances for internment at RAF Stations at Llandow and St Athan. This promptly ensured that the doctor could examine those showing any signs of life.

Searching, cleaning and identification of often mutilated bodies took place at these temporary mortuaries.

All articles of property were also removed from the scene under supervision.

One particularly distressing responsibility was removing anyone from the scene who wasn't on official duty.

Relatives of the victims who had arrived by car to collect their loved ones from the airport had witnessed the crash and immediately driven around to the field desperate for news, blocking the narrow roads and preventing the emergency services gaining access.

The police had to gently remove these distressed relatives, and take steps to make sure that all roads converging on Sigginston, Llandow and St Athan were kept clear for ambulances.

The Western Mail newspaper paid tribute to Chief Constable Jones and his men for their co-operation under such exacting conditions, commenting on 18th March that:

Despite the urgency of their own duties, all contributed in the presentation to the public of the details of the crash, and also reported a particularly tragic story witnessed by one of their journalists:

A Police Officer, writing down a name called out of an identified man was told by a youth who had overheard it that it was his father's name. Then came his mother's and his uncle's. The officer put down his pencil.

"Come with me my boy, away from this. I'll show you a place around the back, and you do what I tell you, have a good cry, and I'll be round with a cup of tea for you."

On hearing that two young sisters and a grandmother who turned 78 that day had to be told, he went on to add:

"You go back, but don't go home. Go to find your minister first and let him go with you to break the news."

All of the deceased were transported to the mortuary by 4.35pm on Sunday 12th March, and the following day, the bodies at Llandow were moved to St Athan where there were better facilities.

By 6.35pm on Wednesday 15th March, all the bodies had been removed for burial by the relatives, and funerals took place on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday of that same week.



Glamorgan Police Officers inspect the damage

The Cause of the Crash

The cause of the disaster at first appeared to be a complete mystery.

The outgoing flight from Llandow to Dublin had passed without incident and the Avro Tudor V airliner had approached the runway on the return journey in ideal weather conditions, so why did the pilot lose control of the plane?

An inquiry into the cause of the tragedy was held at the Law Courts in Cardiff on Tuesday 16th May 1950.

The possibility of pilot error was investigated with Air Vice Marshal "Pathfinder" Donald Bennett, Managing Director of the owner's company Fairflight Ltd commenting that:

"It is a simple case of the pilot's seat slipping back with acceleration and the pilot took the joystick back with him."

The real cause of the crash was never fully explained and this theory may have been correct.

However, the loading of the aircraft apparently caused a shift in the plane's centre of gravity, and was named as a significant contributory factor. It had resulted in the plane becoming unstable and difficult to manage.

The verdict was that of accidental death, but because the gravity shift had sufficiently reduced the margin of safety to contravene the aircraft's Certificate of Airworthiness, proceedings against Fairflight Ltd began on 1st November 1950.

The hearing was terminated at 7.45pm on 2nd November. Fairflight Ltd were found guilty, given a fine of £50 and ordered to pay £100 costs.

It was recognised that although a terrible tragedy had taken place, it could have been a great deal worse.

Firstly, the plane had not caught fire, which would have caused enormous difficulties in recognising

victims and even greater anguish for the relatives. Secondly, the plane had landed just short of the village of Sigginston, which had a population of 94.

The Aftermath

Thanks to the quick-thinking of PC John Davies, the Glamorgan Constabulary was able to present a cheque for £76 (6s 10d) to the Llandow Air Disaster Fund organised by the Western Mail and South Wales Echo newspapers.

This represented the value of unidentified money, and other unclaimed, later auctioned property, belonging to those who lost their lives in the crash.

The scale of the tragedy, which was comparable to the South Wales colliery disasters of the past, touched the hearts of all those who were associated with it.



The central section of the splane, the damaged seating is clearly visible and graphically reveals the force of the impact

The generosity of police officers and civilian support staff raised a further £115 (11s 0d) for the appeal, going a small way towards easing the suffering of the 80 families left behind.

Notes

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KEEPING SOUTH WALES **SAFE** THROUGH TIME