

INDIVIDUAL HISTORY

FAIREY BATTLE MK.1 L5343
MUSEUM ACCESSION NUMBER 1990/0691/A

- 1939 Built by Austin Motors's shadow factory at Longbridge to contract 540408/36 for 863 Fairey Battle Mk.1 aircraft delivered Oct 1938 - August 1940, serials L4935-L5797 (the last 200 being delivered as Battle TT.1 target-towing aircraft).
- 13 Sep 39 Delivered to No.24 MU Stoke Heath, near Droitwich, Worcs, fitted with Merlin III s/n 3685-119018.
- 09 Dec 39 On charge at RAF Sutton Bridge and allocated to the recently formed No.266 Squadron who were working up prior to receiving Spitfire Mk.1 aircraft from Jan 40, having received its first Battles in Dec 39, for training - the Squadron was originally planned to be a Blenheim Unit.
- 24 Feb 40 To No.20 MU Aston Down for storage.
- 13 Jul 40 Allocated to No.98 Squadron, Gatwick, Surrey which was reforming after service with the Advanced Air Striking Force in France, having been recalled from the continent 17 Jun 40.
- End of Jul 40 Squadron transferred to Coastal Command No.15 Group.
- 26 Jul 40 Squadron flew to RAF Newton, Notts to be paraded before His Majesty King George VI and Lord Portal, Chief of the Air Staff.
- 27 Aug 40 Left Newton for RAF Wick, then flown direct from there to Kaldadarnes, Iceland as part of 'Operation Frigidaire'. The unit commander, Wg Cmd G R Ashton AFC led the squadron in L5343; his observer was Sgt R G Walder and the wireless operator/air gunner Sgt W A S Jessep. This 700-mile flight, of 5hrs 20mins duration, the first group flight of land-based aircraft to Iceland, was undertaken by A Flight's nine Fairey Battles, escorted by two Short Sunderland's using the codename for the flight 'Frigidaire I'. See photo of L5343 and A Flight crews in ex-Strathallen correspondence file in Aircraft Department. Kaldadarnes was a newly constructed airfield in southern Iceland; the Battles were intended for coastal patrol duties and for bombing any German invasion fleet should Iceland be attacked; the first operational patrols were flown on 28 August.
- Fri 13 Sep 40 A Canadian Flying Officer (later Squadron Leader), Clayton 'Willy' Wilcox was detailed to fly Lt Col H L Davies of the Royal Engineers, engaged in building military sites in Iceland, to inspect an army detachment based at the airstrip under construction at Melgerdismelar

near Akureyi, 70 minutes flying time inland from Kaldadarnes. Weather conditions were unfavourable, but Wilcox agreed to attempt the flight and L5343 took off at 1800 hours. The aircraft entered cloud shortly after take off and had to climb to ten thousand feet to find clear sky. Lacking navigational aids, Wilcox had to rely on dead reckoning to reach his destination. The cloud cover persisted and it was decided to return to Kaldadarnes. The engine then failed in flight (an oil seal had broken causing the main bearing to seize) necessitating a forced landing on a site near a glacier adjacent to a small lake. The aircraft was carrying a spare propeller blade for Akureyi airstrip, which was pointing straight at Col Davies' stomach, so he moved to stand behind Wilcox, the pilot. The chosen landing place looked smooth from the air but was actually covered in boulders up to three feet high; the aircraft touched down at c.2000 hours, bounced several times and swerved to the right as the undercarriage collapsed. Wilcox twisted his ankle, but there were no other injuries. This was the first RAF aircraft to crash in Iceland. See account of crash by Walley Forney in Aircraft Department file. There is also a newspaper account by Col Davies on the same Aircraft Department file, and the main details in 'The War Years in the Southland' 2nd Edition The Fairey Battle and The Hudson Squadrons G. Kristinsson Arnes-publication c.2002 pp.68-69.

(As L5343 was being lost, the Squadron welcomed the nine Battles of B Flight, flown direct from Wick that day. The Squadron continued to fly Battles until Sep 1942).

The aircraft suffered a crushed starboard wingtip and some crumpling of the forward fuselage lower surfaces. Sustained by some 30lb of food supplies including beer, condensed milk, chocolate and cigarettes the 2 men then walked some 70km crossing 3 rivers, over two days before encountering local farmers, with Davies almost carrying Wilcox, who was suffering with his twisted ankle, towards the end. After rescue he was hospitalised with pneumonia and his ankle injury. Before leaving the aircraft they had cut strips of cloth from a parachute and laid them out as a large arrow pointing in the direction they intended to hike.

- 14 Sep 40 Crash site located by air, at noon.
- 16 Sep 40 Crew located and returned to Kaldadarnes on an army truck.
- 17-18 Sep 40 An RAF team including Wally Forney visited the crash site to remove useful equipment and destroy the remains of the aircraft since it was impossible to salvage due to the remoteness of the crash site. The guns, ammunition, radio and instruments were removed and fuel drained from the tanks was poured over the airframe and a very cartridge fired into the port fuel tank to complete the destruction. The fire destroyed the centre fuselage and wing root areas. Photo of recovery team with the Battle - FlyPast Feb 95 p.41 and January 2009 p.64.
- 20 Jan 41 Struck off charge.

1970 Engine and propeller removed for scrap. The engine survived, being purchased by local enthusiast Robin Boucher from a Reykjavik scrapyard, but the propeller was melted down.

In 1989 a replacement propeller was shipped to the UK from Iceland following recovery from the crash site of fellow No.98 Squadron Battle P6570, which had force landed the day after L5343, just short of the runway at Kaldadarnes, burying the engine and propeller in the bog when it nosed over. This engine and propeller had been recovered in the Spring of 1979 by the Icelandic Aviation Historical Society. Photon – Flypast January 2009 p.75.

The surviving section of the forward cockpit was removed by an oil company who intended to use it as a route marker 6 miles away, ending up close to an old fuel cache by the Phorjsa river.

Photos of wreck c.1970 prior to removal of engine and cockpit - FlyPast Aug 85/January 2009 p.63 and RAFM file (which has 2 shots, 1 with propeller still attached and pilots seat in place).

1971 Wally Forney, a member of the original 98 Squadron recovery team in 1940, contacted the RAF Museum with details of the aircraft and its loss, and provided much additional information as the recovery progressed.

1972 Decision made to recover the remains of L5343 as the basis of a Battle restoration project.

The expedition to recover the aircraft was mounted from RAF Leeming led by Flt Lt Erik Mannings, deputy leader Flt Lt Len Woodgate (later Keeper at the Aerospace Museum, Cosford) and 10 other team members as a training exercise. Two LWB landrovers were used towing two 15cwt trailers. With the expedition based at Keflavik, upon arrival, local enthusiasts assisted with the recovery of the pilot's seat from a Garage owner who had removed it in 1956-it had been used as a child's swing in a garden. Parts recovery commenced on 6 Aug 72 with collection of the salvaged engine; the isolated cockpit section was recovered on 10 Aug and remains at the crash site from 11-18 August, including a wing tip, panels and carburettor intake from the lake itself.

Photo of crash site as found by expedition with wings and tail only remaining - FlyPast Feb 95 p.41; Lloyds Log March 1973 p.18 - 19. Detailed account of recovery by Len Woodgate - FlyPast Feb 95 p.39-43.

The wings, with the serial number clearly visible on their undersides, were removed on a special landrover roof rack. Photos: FlyPast Feb 95 p.42 and Jan 95 p.52. Photo of tail section on back of landrover - Aviation News Vol.1 No.15 p.15, and arriving at Reykjavik – Flypast January 2009 p.68. .Doris also holds an extensive archive on the recovery, with photos, presented by Len Woodgate in 1997.

- 21 Nov 72 Battle components collected from Keflavik by an RAF Belfast and taken to RAF Leeming, Yorkshire. Photo stored at Reykjavik prior to flight home – Flypast January 2009 p.68
- 1973 Restoration work began at Leeming, initially concentrating on the Merlin engine and relatively intact port mainplane, but restoration work slowed as key personnel were posted away.
The starboard wing was very badly damaged and there was no wing centre section. Stripping the engine by Flt Lt Paul Brindley revealed two bent cam rods and pistons corroded into the steel cylinder liners. Photo of restored engine (at St Athan) FlyPast Feb 95 p.43, with cockpit framing, also Air Extra No.2 p.30.
The engine was restored by April 1974.
Photo of unrestored port wing at Leeming - Air Extra No.2 p.31 and Air Classics Feb 77 p.85. The spar had been cut to separate the wings in 1972, and the starboard wing was badly damaged inboard by fire.
- 1976 Remains moved to storage at Henlow. It had been intended to use parts of three Battles (including K7571 and R7361) - mainly wing sections and undercarriage parts - recovered by RAF Henlow OCTU cadets from Larkhill ranges, Salisbury Plain, Wilts in 1970, also stored at Henlow until disposed of to a Baldock, Herts scrapyard in 1974. (See Control Column July 1969 and May 1971). These remains did yield a few small parts for the project before disposal, however, including undercarriage components and two flaps (Aviation Archaeologist Sep/Oct 1974 p.560).
- 1977 Spare centre/rear fuselage and wings acquired from Sir William Roberts' Strathallen collection and delivered to Henlow.

The fuselage was identified as L5340, built by Austin Motors, Longbridge in July 1939 from the same batch as L5343 - initially thought to be P2183 but later re-identified, since P2183 was shot down in France in May 1940. Examination of the rear fuselage confirmed the serial as L5-blank-40. However, in 1999 the undersides of the port and starboard wings newly delivered to Australia ex Cardington still bore the serial P218-; P2185 and P2187 both served with the RCAF being struck off charge for spares 11 Jan 1943, three months before L5340 was withdrawn from use, so it is just possible that their wings were incorporated into this aircraft. In addition, RCAF Battles P2186 and P2188 went to the War Assets Corporation in 1945/6. Photo as received (at St Athan) - FlyPast Nov.1983. Photo of wing in Australia - Flypast May 2000 p.20.

L5340 History

- 20 Jul 39 Construction date found on fuselage manufacturer's plate.
- 13 Sep 39 Taken on charge at No.24 MU Stoke Heath (same day as L5343).
- 10 Jan 40 No.36 MU Sealand for packing.

- 24 Feb 40 Struck off UK charge - to Canada.
- 02 Apr 40 Taken on charge at RCAF Trenton - HQ No.1 Training Command as RCAF 1614.
- 19 Mar 41 No.2 Training Command (Prairies), for service with the newly opened No.3 Bombing & Gunnery School at Macdonald, Manitoba. From the end of June 1942 Macdonald became a straight gunnery school
- 17 Apr 43 Stored at Macdonald in reserve with No.2 Training Command. The previous month the base had a peak of 143 Battles on strength.
- 23 May 44 Awaiting Disposal.
- 16 Feb 45 To War and Assets Corporation - struck off RCAF charge at No.3 Bombing Gunnery School RCAF MacDonald, Manitoba - one of 125 Battles sold that day. Flying hours since new - 472.40. The school ceased operations in early 1945.
- c.1945 Sold to a Blacksmith, who later sold the aircraft to the late Mr Frank Symesku, a gypsum miner, who hoped to use the fuselage parts to build a boat.
- 1975 To storage with collector Wes Agnew, Hartney, Manitoba by this date, via a Michigan based American collector who originally acquired and partially restored Battle survivor R3950, now at Brussels after some years with the former Strathallen collection. Photo of L5340 fuselage and wings; Control Column Aug/Sep 1977 p.137 and also Flypast January 2009 p.75. Purchased by Sir William Roberts, then owner of R3950, as a spares source.
- Jun 77 Fuselage, tail group and a pair of axe/torch cut wings shipped to UK on RFA Sir Lancelot to Marchwood Military Port, Hants; arrived at RAF Henlow by 9 July 1977 for storage following donation to RAFM by Sir William Roberts. Photo as delivered to Henlow; Control Column Oct 1977 p.159.
- 1983 Flt Lt. Len Woodgate, officer I/C the RAF St Athan historic aircraft regional collection, acquired the remains of L5340 and L5343, moved from Henlow to St Athan by a team from RAF Abingdon. Restoration recommenced under the direction of Wing Cmd Paul Brindley. Large sections of the surviving rear fuselage were reskinned, and the tail of L5343, grafted onto the main fuselage section of L5340, as was L5343's forward cockpit section. Both pairs of wings were also at St. Athan. (from where the unused pair moved to storage at RC&RC Cardington c.1994). Photo of restoration at St Athan - FlyPast Jan 85 p.48. Wheels and tyres were found at St Athan and instruments for the restoration came from RAFM stocks. The finished restoration is c.40%. L5343 from Iceland, 30%. L5340, 25% new structure and 5%, donated components, and retains the serial number L5343 as the major identifiable

parts are from that aircraft.

Contrasting photos of restoration as of Mar 85 and Mar 87 - Aviation Archaeologist Series 2 No.4 1987. Photos of fuselage of L5340 under restoration - FlyPast May 84 and January 2009 p.74; other photos of restoration in progress - Aircraft Illustrated Nov 86 p.12, with main fuselage and wings assembled and engine installed; also FlyPast Dec 87 p.33.

- Sep 87 Major structural work complete; aircraft back on its wheels. Photos: Aeroplane Monthly Jan 88 p.3; FlyPast Jan 88 p.50; Volunteer service, and MSC personnel used on the restoration from Jan 86; the last 2 years were spent in detail work. All control surfaces were rebuilt and refabricated; a new main spar section had to be built to attach the wings; this was fitted to L5340 fuselage section.
- 06 Mar 90 Completed Battle rolled out at St Athan, with VO-S codes; Photos: Aviation News 13-26 Apr 90 p.1085; Air International Jan 90 p.314; FlyPast May 90 p.8 and January 2009 p.72-3/4.
- 20 Mar 90 Restored airframe delivered to RAFM by ASTF Abingdon and initially installed in main aircraft hall. Formally unveiled at Hendon 19 May 1990 - ceremony attended by former pilot 'Willy' Wilcox. Photos at Hendon; FlyPast Feb 95 p.39; Aeroplane Monthly May 90 p.262; Aircraft Illustrated Apr 91 p.218; Air Britain Battle File p.123. Later moved to Bomber Command Hall c.1993, where it remained until 2006. Photo; Flypast February 2006 p.6.
- 19 Jan 2006 Fuselage by road to Medway Aircraft Preservation Society at Rochester, Kent for further restoration work including corrosion treatment of tail section and wing roots in particular, refitting of panels and completion of the cockpit. Wings and propeller followed 8 March 2006. Photos of fuselage at Rochester – Flypast April 2006 p.5, December 2008 p.7, January 2009 pp.80-81 and February 2009 p.75; Aeroplane April 2006 p.4, August 2008 p.6 and September 2013 p.41. Aircraft illustrated April 2006 p.127; Aviation News May 2006 p.372 and February 2007 p.70. Restored engine – Flypast January 2007 p.15 and January 2009 p.79, and Aviation News February 2007 p.70.
- 19 Oct 2008 Following completion of some 25,000 man-hours work by MAPS, loaded onto Low-loader at Rochester. Photo – Flypast January 2009 p.78.
- 20 Oct 2008 Returned to RAFM Hendon.
- 6 Nov 2008 By road to MBCC at RAFM Cosford for additional airframe work
- 13 Jul 2010 Arrived by road at RAFM Hendon for reassembly and display in Bomber Hall. Photo during re-assembly; Aeroplane November 2010 p.13. Reassembly completed 11 November 2010. Photo as completed – Flypast March 2014 p.90.

L5343 is one of several Fairey Battle survivors. These include:

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| N2188 | Recovered from swamp at Port Pirie.South Australian Historical Aviation Museum Inc. Port Adelaide. Photos - Flypast Mar 98 p.23; May 2000 p.20. | (RAAF) |
| P2234 | At one time with Tex La Vallee, Quebec | (RCAF 1317) |
| R3950 | Musee Royal de l'Armee, Brussels | (RCAF 1899) |
| R7384 | Canadian National Aviation Museum, Rockcliffe | (RCAF) |
| L5306 | Canadian Museum of Flight & Transportation, Langley, BC | (RCAF 2139) |
| | Composite - Western Canada Aviation Museum, Winnipeg | (RCAF 3947) |
| | Parts –Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum, Brandon | (RCAF) |
| | (Cockpit only) Daryl Hibbs, Wagga NSW | (RAAF) |
| | (Cockpit Only) David Perrott, Australia | (RAAF) |
| | (Cockpit Only) Dairey Flat, New Zealand 2005 | |
| | Parts inc. cockpit and wings ex Canada to Bruntingthorpe 2006; | (RCAF) |

L5343 was thought originally to be fitted with the wings from Canada; the pair of wings left over from the restoration, possibly actually ex-Canada - see above - remained stored at RC&RC Cardington, and were donated by the RAFM to the N2188 project in 1999.

(There is some confusion over wings used in the restoration and the pair sent to Australia may include at least one, and probably both, acquired from Canada, serialled P218-)

TEXT - ANDREW SIMPSON