

World War Two plane crashes in the UAE

by Peter Hellyer and Laurence Garey

Introduction

The effect of World War Two on the United Arab Emirates – then the Trucial States – has received little attention. One key source of information is the archives of the British Residency in the Gulf. Other sources, largely untapped, include the military records of Britain and the USA, both of whom had personnel stationed in Sharjah.

The War coincided with a period of severe drought, and the rising cost of foodstuffs caused by wartime restrictions had a major impact on the country's residents, while the pearling trade, already in decline, was also severely affected.

During recent preliminary research on some of these issues, data has been collected relating to air crashes in the Emirates during and immediately after the War. This is presented here for the record, and in the hope that it may stimulate further research.

B.O.A.C. HP42 'Hannibal' – March 1940

Considerable mystery surrounds an early wartime crash, which may have been in what was to become the UAE. Whilst on a flight with a crew of four and four passengers from Jiwani (now in Pakistan) to Sharjah on 1st March 1940, a Handley Page HP42 four-engined biplane, belonging to the newly-formed British Overseas Airways Corporation, BOAC, (the new name adopted by the former Imperial Airways the previous year), registered G-AAGX and named Hannibal, disappeared. No crash site, wreckage or bodies were ever identified, despite a large-scale search by the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy. Some of the details are as follows.

Hannibal was flying flight CW197 ("Calcutta Westbound"). It left Karachi on 1st March 1940 at about 0600 local time and flew to Jiwani, then took off again for Sharjah. It reported by radio over Jask (on the Iranian coast) at about midday local time, and estimated its arrival at Sharjah at about 1330 local time.

The British Political Officer for the Trucial Coast, based in Sharjah, reported that: "The last radio message received from her was when she was about 40 miles out to sea, and the only distinguishable letters were ..."OS"... This, however, was not considered by B.O.A.C. staff to have been a distress signal. A search followed in which RAF planes from Karachi and Basra co-operated with sloops, and which continued for nearly a week. No trace of wreckage has been found or has since (by 21st March) been reported by any of the sheikhs." (1) He also reported "On March 4th, I flew to Kalba by RAF plane in connection with the missing landplane, and went from there to Fujairah for the same purpose." (2). (Both locations are on the UAE East Coast).

At the time of the radio message, it was unclear whether Hannibal was still over the sea or already flying over the mountains between the East Coast and Sharjah. Conflicting records, from official and unofficial sources, add to the mystery. Where did Hannibal crash? In the sea off Dibba, or even between Sharjah and the mountains to the East? When did it crash? Retrospective calculations made by aviation historians suggest that the actual crash

date was 2nd March 1940, and it has been speculated that it could have been as late as the 4th. However, the Political Officer's report clearly states that it went missing on 1st March.

Hannibal was carrying high-ranking government and military chiefs, and theories, apart from a simple crash – perhaps offshore - range from sabotage to hijacking. The flight's original passengers were off-loaded to another flight, and the accident passengers substituted at Karachi, which is strange. There is even the suggestion that a load of gold was aboard. Amazingly, this incident is still classified as secret in the UK, and various amateur aviation archaeologists claim to have received warnings not to investigate too deeply. An interesting website on this disappearance can be found at: http://rrhobby.ca/flight_cw197.htm

Curiously, the published British monthly records from the Gulf for the period make no further mention of the incident after the initial reports in March.

RAF crash near Dhadnah, 1943

In mid-February 1943 (the precise date is not clear), a Wellington bomber of the Royal Air Force en route from Sharjah to Gwadar, on Pakistan's Makran coast, made a forced landing on the coast of Fujairah. The initial report said the crash had been near 'Bidyah' (Bidiya), although subsequently it became clear that the incident took place near Dhadnah, further north along the coast.

One of the crew was killed in the landing, and it was initially reported that "Local Arabs are reported to have been friendly and reasonably helpful." (3)

A subsequent report provided further information, adding that "Arabs from the neighbouring village of Dhadnah were soon on the scene and at once engaged themselves in the quiet pilfering of articles of clothing and such other contents of burst suitcases as were scattered in the wake of the wrecked aircraft."

It went on to quote a Colonel de Watteville of the Royal Engineers, a passenger on the aircraft, as saying in regard to the 'pilfering' that "the Arabs, though not hostile, were quite uncontrollable."

It took three days for the survivors to be evacuated by sea. Prior to that, the Sheikh of Fujairah, Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad al-Sharqi, "arrived at Dhadnah and arranged for a guard to be placed on the machine until the salvage of all valuable equipment had been completed," this presumably also being taken off by sea.

The British records noted that "The Sheikh will be suitably rewarded for his assistance," (4), although there is no subsequent reference in the archives (up the end of 1946, at least), to the handing over of any reward.

The precise identity of this aircraft remains a mystery. No record other than that cited above has yet been traced, although it seems likely that this Wellington was one of the later, more powerful versions (e.g. the Mark X) that were widely used by the RAF Coastal Command in the Middle East in the War.

Apparently the crash site was nearer to Rul Dhadnah than to Dhadnah village itself, and the dead crew member may have been buried at the site (5). With the help of the local authorities, investigations are now under way to see whether the crash site, and the grave

can be identified. If the grave does, indeed, exist and can be located, it would be the first known Commonwealth War Grave on record in the United Arab Emirates.

Anti-Locust Planes – Sir Bani Yas, 1944

On 22nd April 1944, two 'Anson' aircraft belonging to the Anti-Locust Mission crash-landed at 'Yas Island' (Sir Bani Yas), en route from Sharjah to Bahrain. There was an emergency airstrip and fuel tank on Sir Bani Yas, established between the World Wars to serve the Britain to India route of Imperial Airways, the forerunner of British Airways, although it is not clear from the records whether the Ansons crash-landed at the strip, or elsewhere on the island.

The records noted that: "There was a good deal of excitement as the crews of the planes were disturbed at what they thought was the hostile attitude of the local inhabitants. In point of fact the local inhabitants were not hostile but frightened and on overcoming their fear made the usual Bedouin demands for money and firearms. Letters addressed to the local inhabitants by the Political Agent was (*sic*) dropped late in the afternoon of the 23rd and although the crews of the 'Ansons' are stated to have said that they had no effect the fact remains that no further alarmist signals were received and the airmen were provided with a bag of flour and a bag of peas by the "hostile natives." Unfortunately on the 24th a serious mishap occurred with a petrol fire and one man was very seriously burnt. A B.O.A.C. flying boat landed at Yas Island and the injured were evacuated to Bahrain. As a result of the efforts of an engineering party which went down by sea to Yas island, the aircraft were flown off and arrived in Bahrain on the 26th" (6).

By this stage of the War, there were serious food shortages in the Emirates and it is interesting to note that the Sir Bani Yas residents provided food to the stranded Anson crews.

The Anti-Locust Mission, joined by Wilfred Thesiger after the War, was already active in the peninsula at this time. Its records may be another source of information on the UAE during the period.

Flying Fortress (B17) - Jebel Dhanna, 1944

On 2nd May 1944, a B17 bomber (Flying Fortress), "force-landed ... on the mainland opposite Yas Island."

The British records note that the aircraft was on a photo-reconnaissance flight. An approach has now been made to the US authorities to see whether any of the photographs can be traced – it would certainly be interesting to see them.

Clearly the pilot had some warning of trouble, for the archive report adds that "Four members of the crew descended by parachute and were found the next morning some 49 miles to the east of the aircraft. Two of them were slightly injured while the two members of the crew who remained with the aircraft escaped without any injuries."

The records add that "It is understood that the 'Flying Fortress' is a total loss as it was landed on a part of the beach below high water mark and is therefore submerged twice in every twenty four hours."

The location, presumably close to Jebel Dhanna, has not yet been identified, but perhaps some older local

inhabitants may be able to point out the spot, even if all remains of the plane itself have since been removed or have disintegrated.

An evacuation of crew members was also not without incident, the records stating: "On the 23rd a Royal Air Force machine landing near the 'Flying Fortress' to rescue the two members of the crew was slightly damaged but will probably be able to be flown off after repairs have been carried out," (7).

Since there is no further mention in the records of the 'Flying Fortress' or of the RAF plane, presumably the latter did, in fact, manage to take off. There is also no mention as to whether the RAF plane came from Sharjah, Bahrain or elsewhere, or of the origins of the Flying Fortress.

We have so far been unable to trace any record of this crash in US military sources, e.g. see

<http://home.att.net/~jbaugher/usafserials.html>

The fact that the information comes from British records and that the RAF was involved in the rescue may suggest that the plane might have been an RAF Flying Fortress. The B17 was used by the RAF in relatively small numbers, especially by Coastal Command, operating weather reconnaissance flights. These were, however, usually in the North Atlantic.

US C46 (Curtiss Commando), near Dubai, 1945

In July 1945, an American C46 crashed south-east of Dubai, with the loss of all three crew members.

The plane had taken off from Karachi, bound for Abadan, Iran, on 26th of July. It was last heard of east of Sharjah, but no distress signals were sent (8). Aircraft from Sharjah carried out a sea and land search but failed to find any sign of the plane (9).

It was not until 29th July that the Political Agent in Bahrain and those in Muscat and Kuwait, as well as the Residency Agent in Sharjah, were informed. On the same day, however, the plane was found. Two reports, by the Political Agent in Bahrain and by the Sharjah Residency Agent, provide further information.

The Political Agent's Intelligence Summary noted: "the wreckage of this plane was discovered 13 1/2 miles south east of Dubai, and reported to the Royal Air Force. Rescue parties were rushed to the spot and the bodies of three of the crew removed to Abadan by air for burial. The wreckage has been examined with a view to discovering the cause of the crash but its results are not yet known here" (10).

The Residency Agent, benefiting from his proximity and from access to information from the RAF base at Sharjah, was able to provide more information: "On the 29th July two bedouins of Beni Yas tribe found the wreckage of the aircraft lying at a place called Naqa Bishr, 13 1/2 miles south-east of Dubai, and reported to the R.A.F. authorities through the Shaikh of Dubai... The aircraft had on board 1000 lbs of freight and mail. It was so badly damaged that nothing could be salvaged out of it" (11).

Once again, our efforts to find other records on this crash have proved fruitless. US records mention no C46 accident on the date given.

<http://home.att.net/~jbaugher/usafserials.html>

It would be interesting to know whether the crash site can still be located. Perhaps Dubai-based readers could investigate.

The final report of a crash-landing comes from shortly after the war. It occurred in March 1946, when an RAF plane 'belly-landed' on Abu Musa.

The initial report in the Bahrain Intelligence Summary noted: "On the 18th March (1946), an R.A.F. Wellington flew over the s.s. 'Afghanistan' anchored off the island of Abu Musa to drop a message on board. Unfortunately in doing so the pilot misjudged his height and struck the top of one of the ship's masts, carrying it away, and damaging the tail and rudder of his aircraft. After jettisoning its petrol, the 'plane made a belly-landing on the island. The crew were uninjured and were taken to Sharjah the same day by launch.

The engines were undamaged, but the 'plane has been 'written off' and offered, with the dismantled engines, to the Shaikh of Sharjah."

We have been able to identify this aircraft as a Wellington Mark XIII of 294 Squadron, Coastal Command, RAF, serial number ME937, one of the last Wellingtons built of the over 11,000 total production. This squadron was based at Basrah from 1 June 1945 until it was disbanded on 8 April 1946 (12). In his book on the RAF station on Masirah Island, Oman, Colin Richardson describes the detachment of a Wellington of 294 Squadron from August 1945 until 1946. He describes it as very old and unserviceable most of the time. Indeed, one of the senior maintenance crew was killed falling off a lorry! (13). It is possible that this was the aircraft that crashed on Abu Musa.

A wry note of humour was inserted by the Political Agent, who commented: "There is quite a brisk trade springing up on the Trucial Coast of beating out trays from 'pranged' aircraft (14).

It would be interesting to know whether any of these trays can still be traced.

The S.S. Afghanistan was off Abu Musa to load red oxide, (haematite), a mineral then being mined on the island, as it also had been, at one time, on Abu Dhabi's Western island of Dalma.

A report of the same incident in the Trucial Coast News Report notes that the crew of the plane were evacuated to Sharjah by the launch of the Political Officer, Trucial Coast – this post having been created after the end of the War to replace the former Residency Agent (15).

Further information would be gratefully received on these or on other incidents related to the Second World War in the Emirates.

References

1. Trucial Coast Report for period March 1st – 21st', in Political Diaries of the 'Persian' Gulf, Vol. 14, 1940-41, Archive Editions, London, 1990. p. 79.
2. Trucial Coast Report for period March 1st – 21st, (*op. cit.*) p. 79
3. 'Intelligence Summary of the Political Agency, Bahrain, (henceforth 'Bahrain Summary') for the period 16th to 28th February 1943. No. 4 of 1943', in: Political Diaries (*op. cit.*). 1990. Vol. 15. p. 421.
4. 'Bahrain Summary' for the period 1st to 15th March 1943. No., 5 of 1943. In Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 15, pp. 443-444.

5. *Pers. comm.* Ruler's Office, Fujairah, 4th March 2004

6. 'Bahrain Summary' for the period 16th to 30th April 1944'. No. 8 of 1944'. In Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 16, pp. 87-88.

7. 'Bahrain Summary' for the period 16th to 31st May 1944. No. 10 of 1944'. In: Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 16, p.112.

8. 'Bahrain Summary' for the period 15th to 31st July 1945. No. 14 of 1945'. In: Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 16, p. 454

9. 'Trucial Coast News Report No. 14 for the period ending the 31st of July 1945'. In: Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 16, p. 461.

10. 'Bahrain Summary' for the period 15th to 31st July 1945. No. 14 of 1945'. In: Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 16, p. 454

11. 'Trucial Coast News Report No. 14 for the period ending the 31st of July 1945'. In: Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 16, p. 461.

12. R. McNeill, *pers. comm.* April 2004.

13. Richardson, C (2003) **Masirah, Tales from a Desert Island**. Lancaster: Scotforth Books. pp. 148-149

14. 'Bahrain Summary' No. 6 for period from 18th to 31st March 1946'. In: Political Diaries, (*op. cit.*), Vol. 17, p. 64.

15. 'Trucial Coast News Report No 6 for the period ending the 31st March 1946'. In: Political Diaries (*op. cit.*), Vol. 17, p. 73.

Peter Hellyer,
P.O.Box 45553,
Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.
e-mail: hellyer@emirates.net.ae

Laurence Garey,
Route Suisse 43,
CH-1166 Perroy,
Switzerland
e-mail: l.garey@freesurf.ch