

CONTACT!



The Newsletter of the former RAF Defford Reunion Association, now merged with the

DEFFORD AIRFIELD HERITAGE GROUP

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Photo: Geoff Shaw

CANBERRA PR9 HIGH IN ITS NATURAL ENVIRONMENT OVER SYWELL

This photo of the last airworthy Canberra PR9 XH134 in this country was taken in 2014. Sadly, in 2015 XH134 was withdrawn from use and has not flown since. This aircraft had served with 39 Squadron RAF and was one of the last three examples of the type retired from service in 2006. That same year it was delivered to new civilian owners who planned to convert it into a digital reconnaissance platform – a plan that never materialized. Instead, the machine was overhauled to airworthy status and entered into the airshow circuit, receiving its display authorization in 2013. The aircraft reportedly performed its last flight in 2015 and has been located in a hangar at Kemble, Gloucestershire ever since. It is described as complete, but in need of re-certification before being flown.

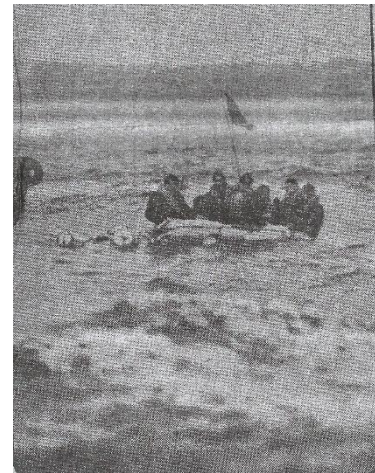
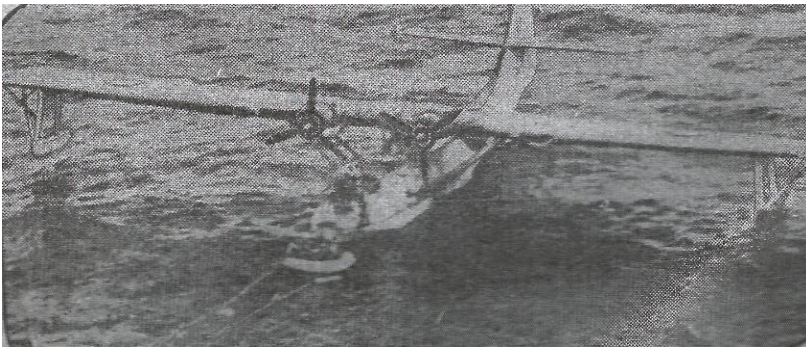
[Canberra XH134 – continued on page 8](#)

Ronald Bain Thomson - an Introduction

I first came across the name Ronald Bain Thomson when researching in the RAF Museum at Hendon for my book 'Top Secret Boeing'. 'Ronnie' Thomson was one of the pilots who flew DZ203/G, the unique and highly significant Boeing 247D 'flying laboratory' of TRE, in 1942 at TFU Defford (and TFU Hurn). Coming from Coastal Command where he had flown Ansons and Whitleys on operations, he was immediately plunged into a very different flying world where he was required to pilot a wide variety of unfamiliar types. Starting in March 1942, his log book features Beaufort, Swordfish V4482, Wellington Ic T2965, Tiger Moth, Hurricane, Blenheim, Lysander, Hudson AM907 (with his CO Sqn Ldr Griffiths and Pilot Officer Leboldus), Defiant, Walrus amphibian L2201, Perceval Vega Gull, Halifax, Miles Mentor – a galaxy of different types at TFU. He flew Boeing 247 DZ203/G for the first time on June 1st 1942, followed by a Beaufighter, Havoc and Wellington (recorded as 'W3661') with Griffiths over Hilbre Island off Hoylake in the Dee estuary, for reasons explained in 'Top Secret Boeing'. He had several more flights in the company of Sqn Ldr Griffiths in July 1942, notably in Airspeed Envoy (the TFU communications 'hack' – see 'Contact!' no. 115 Mar/Apr 2018) with a round trip to Scotland (Drem and Turnhouse) and another round trip with Griffiths to Chivenor. He rounded off his flying at Defford, with his first Lancaster (R5609) and in August 1942 he added the unique Sea Otter amphibian K8854 (see 'Contact!' no. 114 Jan/Feb 2018).

In September 1942, he was posted back to Coastal Command, later to command 206 Squadron at Lajes in the Azores, which had just become available to Britain as a base to counter the mid-Atlantic U-boat threat.

In 1943 he achieved well deserved credit (anonymously) in the national press following a press release about his heroic role, for which he added a DFC to his DSO, surviving through desperate efforts to save himself and his crew, and the crew of another aircraft, after spending six days and nights in rough seas in the North Atlantic, packed in an overloaded dinghy – as related in the article which follows, written by 'Ronnie' Thomson's nephew, DAHG member Andrew Ferrier.



Above, left – *rescued by Catalina.*

Right, *Thomson and crew, 8 men in a dinghy in the North Atlantic for 6 days and nights.*

Headlines in the national press after this epic included:

“6-DAY FIGHT TO SAVE AIRMEN IN ATLANTIC”

and

“BRITISH CREW IN DINGHY SAW AMERICAN RESCUE PLANE WRECKED IN WILD SEAS”

Bob Shaw

Thanks to Dennis Williams for photographs and information in this edition of 'Contact!'

AIR VICE MARSHAL RONALD BAIN THOMSON CB DSO DFC

By Andrew Ferrier

My uncle, Ronnie Thomson, an assistant games master at Gordons College, Aberdeen, joined 612 (County of Aberdeen) Squadron at Dyce in June 1937. He was the first pilot in the group who joined at the same time to go solo in August 1937. He would not have needed any encouragement to volunteer, but certainly his experience of being in Berlin as an athletics coach for the UK Olympic team in 1936 left him in no doubt about what was going to happen in Europe.

Dyce was then a small private air strip used for flights to the Islands and Scandinavia.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 all the squadron had available was some worn out Ansons and open cockpit Tiger Moths. During the winter of 1939/40 the latter were sent out over the North Sea on what were known as Scarecrow Patrols to keep U-boats submerged, where they were less dangerous. If by chance they spotted one or a periscope they would return and alert the nearest RN vessel. Their only armament was a pistol stuffed down a flying boot. In an emergency their only means of communication was a pigeon which would invariably fill the cockpit with feathers.



Finally they received some Whitley twin engine bombers that were totally unsuited for long patrols at low levels. Crews were often lost due to engine failure. Their first experience of ASV radar was in spring 1941, but it was very cumbersome, causing problems in manoeuvring. In April 1941 they were sent out to attack the *'Bismarck'* in Bergen, Norway, but thick fog meant their attack was aborted with none of their 500 lb bombs dropped, although they were on the receiving end of significant fire. Should there have been no fog the Whitleys would have stood little chance.

ABOVE: *'Ronnie' Thomson (right) with fellow Coastal Command crew member, left – they are standing in front of a Whitley aircraft*

In September 1941 they were posted to a station in Iceland which was very basic, but hot swimming pools were a bonus. In December 1941 when US squadrons were posted to Iceland their first experience was to lose most of their aircraft because they were not sufficiently secured against 135 mph gales. By June, Ronnie had exceeded 1,000 operational hours (without a single U-boat sighting), and because of the hours he had to be stood down and returned to Scotland by boat, which was not much fun.

Coastal Command were the unsung heroes of the Second World War. Over the Bay of Biscay in 1942/3 alone saw 170 aircraft lost for only 10 U-boats sunk. Although within range of German fighter bombers, the main enemies were the sea, weather and mechanical failure. If the worst occurred it was seldom a swift death, but a lonely end in a dinghy, expiring perhaps of thirst or exposure.



Throughout April and May until September 1942, he was posted to the Telecommunications Research Establishment (TRE) - which was considered a non-operational rest posting! This involved flying a variety of aircraft, including the unique Boeing 247D DZ203, between three bases as TRE moved from Christchurch to Hurn in 1941 and then to Defford in 1942.

LEFT: *'Ronnie' Thomson at the controls of a Blenheim, TFU Defford 1942*

Ronald Bain Thomson (cont,)

During this time, according to an account he gave to me when staying at my home near Worcester, because it was too foggy to land at Defford he had to make a forced landing on Worcester racecourse when returning from an ASV test over the Bristol Channel. Next morning, borrowing packs of batteries from the nearby bus station he was able to take off again. Strangely, there is no record of this in his log book. There may be some elderly people still alive who saw him land and take off again.

In September 1942 he was posted to 172 Squadron flying Wellingtons fitted with ASV radar. After this, based in Chivenor, his luck changed. In October he sighted and attacked two armed trawlers that returned heavy AA fire. Later, on returning, there was only one trawler, but no confirmation that one was sunk. Then in November he attacked a 10,000 ton armed tanker which returned AA fire. The tanker was subsequently beached and did not return to service. In March 1943 he was credited with three U-boats over a period of six weeks. In another attack the gun crew was left on deck as the U-boat crash-dived.

He later recounted to my mother that he felt great empathy towards the U-boat crews who, like him, were only doing their duty.

In May 1943 he was awarded the DSO and posted to command 206, a Flying Fortress squadron based in Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides

BELOW: Boeing Fortress II of Coastal Command



At last Coastal Command was receiving long range bombers like the Liberator and Fortress which until then had been prioritised by 'Bomber' Harris for the carpet bombing of German cities. Finally, the Allies started to win the Battle of the Atlantic thanks to the Enigma intelligence gained by Bletchley Park, more advanced radar and the long-range bombers that could by then cover much of the North Atlantic.

In July 1943 his luck finally ran out. On sighting a U-boat at 1,500 feet he dived to attack, raking it with cannon fire and straddling it with depth charges. When the Fortress turned, by now badly damaged by return fire, and approached the spot there were 30 Germans swimming for their lives.

Three minutes later the Fortress was so badly damaged it had to ditch. However, only one dinghy was serviceable. All the crew of eight managed to scramble aboard, but all the packs of food, paddles and flares were lost. In the evening of the first day a US Catalina spotted them, but in trying to land on the rough sea it crashed. All the crew managed to scramble aboard two dinghies. For a while the two crews were able to keep in touch, but eventually they lost sight of each other. Sadly, due to rough seas and exposure only one of the American crew of eight survived when rescued eight days later.

After four days in rough seas with waves up to 40 feet high and in a minefield they were rescued by an RAF Catalina stripped as much as possible to reduce weight, plus a very experienced crew. It finally managed to take off and return to Shetland with 13 on board. For these acts Ronnie Thomson, the navigator, the wireless operator and the captain of the Catalina all received DFCs.

In October 1943 he was posted to the Azores as CO to 206 Squadron and in March 1944 he became Wing Commander CO of RAF Lajes in the Azores.

Ronald Bain Thomson (cont.)



LEFT: 'Ronnie' Thomson as Wing Commander

Then in May he was stood down from operations because he had completed a further 1,500 hours. In February 1945 he was posted to 15 Group, and in December 1945 he was demobbed and joined 603 (City of Edinburgh) Squadron, Auxiliary Air Force.

Unhappy with civilian life working for a family business he re-joined the regular RAF with a permanent commission and unusually was not reduced in rank from wing commander when transferring from the AAF to the RAF. In 1948 he became ADC to the Governor of Ceylon. In February 1950 he took part in the Independence Day flypast. He remained in Ceylon until January 1952. After several postings in the UK, in 1953 he was promoted to Group

Captain as Station Commander RAF Kinloss. Then in 1958 he was promoted to Air Commodore as AOC Gibraltar and given the permanent use of a DH Devon.



In June 1960 he was posted to HQ 18 Group at RAF Pitreavie Castle as Air Vice-Marshal AOC Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Before retiring in January 1963 he was posted to a boring desk job as AOC-in-C RAF Flying Training Command in Bracknell.

Although he was strongly tipped to become AOC Coastal Command it was said that he did not make it because he had not gone to Cranwell.

LEFT: My uncle is pictured left with HM The Queen about 1960 when he was AOC Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Naturally he was the whole family's hero, particularly with his nephews. He was an exceptionally nice man with a great sense of humour. He was one of four of my mother's brothers. Three were on continuous active service during WW2, another reached the rank of Wing Commander, but didn't see active service. Apart from my Uncle Ronnie Thomson, another brother was also decorated.

Ronald Bain Thomson died of a heart attack in December 1984 at the age of 72.

THE UNIQUE TUDOR MARK SEVEN AT DEFFORD 1949 TO 1954



The story of the unique Hermes II in recent editions of 'Contact!' aroused interest in another large handsome British tail-dragger which was active at TRE. The one and only Tudor VII created lasting interest among the then youthful 'plane spotters' who are now ageing veterans. So here is the story of the unique Tudor VII which was used quite intensively for research a few years before the advent of the Hermes II at Defford.

The Avro Tudor emerged from a 1943 specification issued by the Brabazon Committee who were charged with planning aircraft to meet the post-war needs of British airlines. The intention was to base an airliner on the wings, Merlin engines, undercarriage and empennage of the Lincoln bomber, combined with a new circular section pressurised fuselage. It soon became apparent that the passenger capacity of the Tudor I was unsatisfactory, so a larger version was planned from the outset. Designated the Tudor II it was designed as a 60-seat passenger aircraft for BOAC, with the fuselage lengthened to 105ft 7in compared to the Tudor I's 79ft 6in, and the fuselage diameter increased by 12 inches, making it the largest UK airliner at that time.

LEFT: Tudor VII as first flown registered G-AGRX. All photographs in this feature Crown copyright.



TUDOR Mk. VII
PROTOTYPE
HERCULES 120
MAY 1947.

LEFT: *Tudor VII VX199 flying from Defford*

But the performance was still unsatisfactory, so the engines on the second prototype G-AGRX were changed to Bristol Hercules 120 air-cooled radial engines. The aircraft became the only Tudor VII, which first flew in April 1946. In June 1948 it was fitted with shorter landing gear with the engines repositioned (inclined) to give better ground clearance. G-AGRX was used for cabin temperature experiments. But the performance remained unsatisfactory, and it was rejected for airline service. The aircraft was delivered to the Ministry of Supply in March 1949 who allotted it to the Telecommunications Research Establishment

(TRE) at Defford, where it received RAF roundels and the serial number VX199.

From 1949 to 1952, the large handsome Tudor VII proved valuable to TRE as a laboratory research aircraft. Initially VX199 was involved in a project to develop infrared (IR) homing for guided weapons. In his RSRE



report 'Aircraft for Airborne Radar Development', W.H. Sleight explains "... during the war years, Germany was ahead of the British in IR science having developed AI IR systems, one of these designated the Kielgerät system was found fitted to a captured JU88 ... (it was) ... removed and in 1949 fitted to Tudor VII VX199 for evaluation..."

LEFT: *VX199 on the runway at Defford*

The consequent trials with captured the German IR system progressed to a first phase at Defford and was code named Blue Lagoon and later Blue Jay. It formed the basis of the Firestreak guided missile,

becoming the first fully operational British air-to-air missile, fitted to the Javelin and Sea Venom in 1958, and later the Sea Vixen and Lightning.

Other experimental IR systems in which Tudor VX199 was involved included Blue Sapphire, Green Thistle and Bay Window for the Mk 3 Homing Eye.



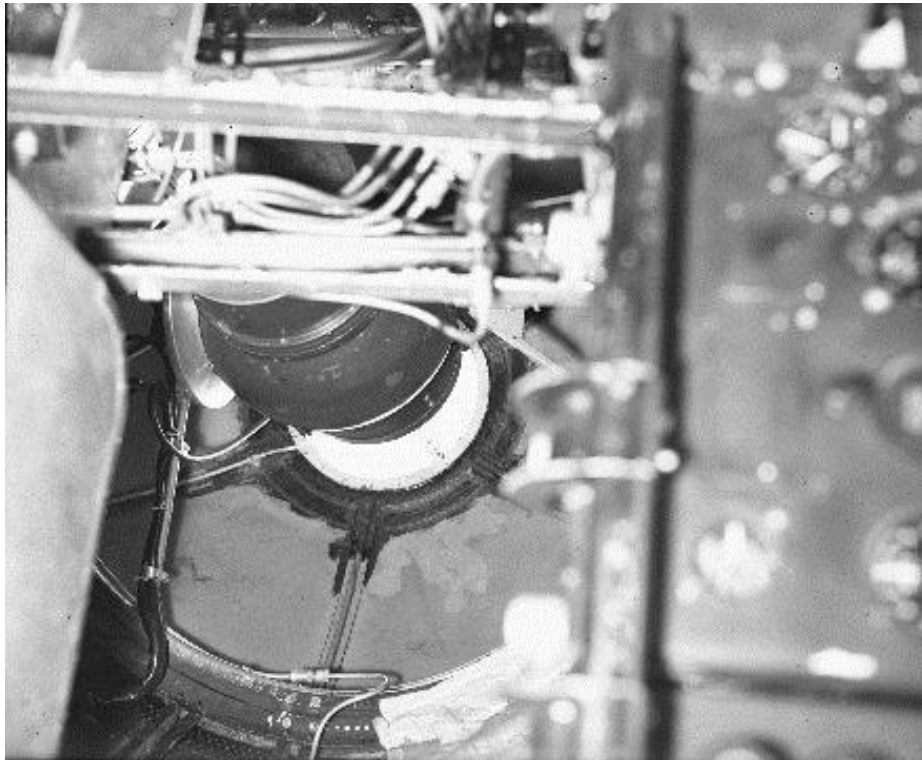
W.H. Sleight records that the Tudor was also used for R&D activities associated with navigation directed systems, including H2S radar as part of the Navigation and Bombing System, as well as Green Satin, Loran, Gee and Rebecca – a rich catalogue of R&D work indeed, illustrating the extent and variety of activities at TRE in the 1950s. In a TRE Progress Report dated January 1950, it was recorded that trials with the IR system fitted to the Tudor were subject to numerous challenges.

LEFT: *VX199 fitted with an infrared detector system in its nose*

Tudor VII (cont.)

At night a Meteor 'target' aircraft could be detected by Blue Lagoon at a range of 15 miles at 10,000ft using a lead sulphide cell cooled with solid CO₂. But flights at a higher level proved abortive because of ice forming on the transmission window in the nose of the Tudor, and methods of blowing the window with warm air had to be considered. So while the window had to be kept free of ice, at the same time the cell had to be cooled. Work continued on a lead telluride cell which could be continuously cooled with liquid nitrogen during flight.

Tudor VX199 was finally withdrawn from use and 'sold for spares' in March 1954.



ABOVE: *Interior of nose of Tudor VII VX199 with infrared detector*

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Cover story continuing from page one

Visitors to the RAF Defford Museum who see the Canberra forward fuselage which we have on display, often ask if there is an airworthy Canberra to be seen in the UK. The answer is yes, there could be, but it was last flown in 2015, since when Canberra PR9 XH134, has been grounded.

XH134 was reported to be for sale at £50K - £70K. But there appear have been no firm offers, presumably because although in airworthy condition (though in need of certification), it is said it would cost around £50,000 an hour for fuel and maintenance to keep it flying.

Do any of our readers have up-to-date news of this aircraft?

Letters to the Editor**GREMLINS – AND WOMEN PILOTS**

Hi Bob,

Will not tempt fate with stories of Gremlins ("Contact!" no. 126), they are very sensitive creatures with long memories!! Enclosed however (below) photo of a poster at the Pearl Harbour Aviation Museum.....these little fellas are obviously not just a British thing.

Best wishes,
Peter Colwill



Fifynella: The ghost in the machine

There is a long-standing superstition among pilots that aircraft are inhabited by mischievous beings called "gremlins," fairies that play pranks on aircraft crews and engineer equipment failures. Sparked by this legend,



Royal Air Force pilot Roald Dahl wrote "The Gremlins" in 1942, a best-selling children's book. In the book, gremlin babies are called "widgets" and gremlin females are called "fifynellas," a name Dahl took from a famous British Thoroughbred racehorse that was also known as the "Flying Filly" during the Great War.

The book was published and illustrated by Random House and Walt Disney Productions to drum up interest in a proposed animated film. More than 80,000 copies of "The Gremlins" were sold before wartime paper shortages halted production. Among its fans were First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who read the book to her grandchildren. Dahl went on to write other children's books such as "James and the Giant Peach" and "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory."

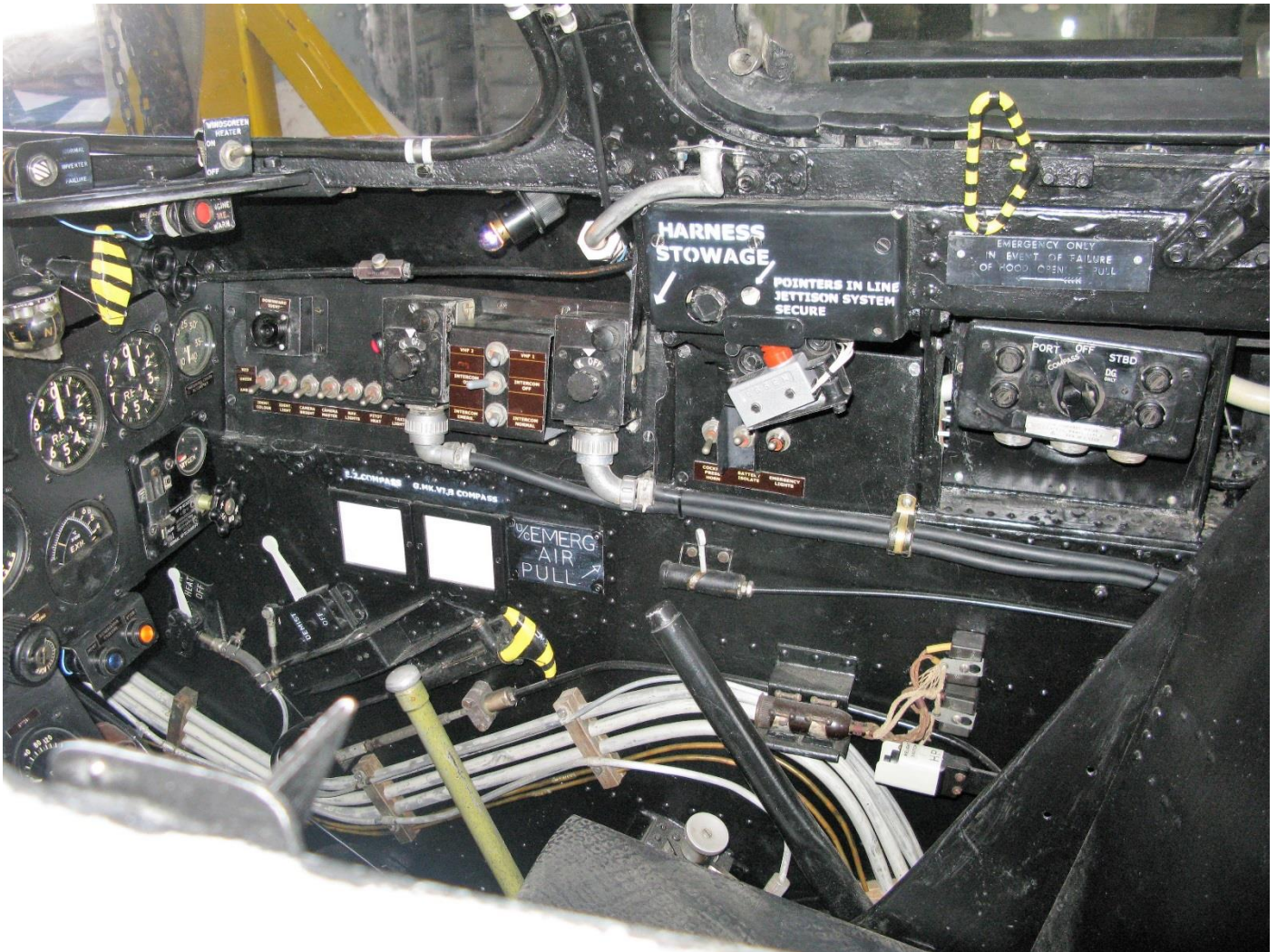
Inspired by the plucky icon, women ferry pilots began making leather jacket patches of the Fifynella character. Eventually the Disney company granted permission for them to use Fifynella as a distinctive insignia. Instead of an obscure character in a forgotten film, Fifynella lives on today as the cheerful symbol of the women pilots of World War II.

METEOR WD686

Work continues apace on restoration of the last plane to fly out of Defford airfield (in 1958), in the workshops of the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection (BDAC) at Old Sarum. These photographs show the magnificently restored interior of the cockpit, photos courtesy Ron Fulton of BDAC



Meteor WD686 in BDAC workshops - latest

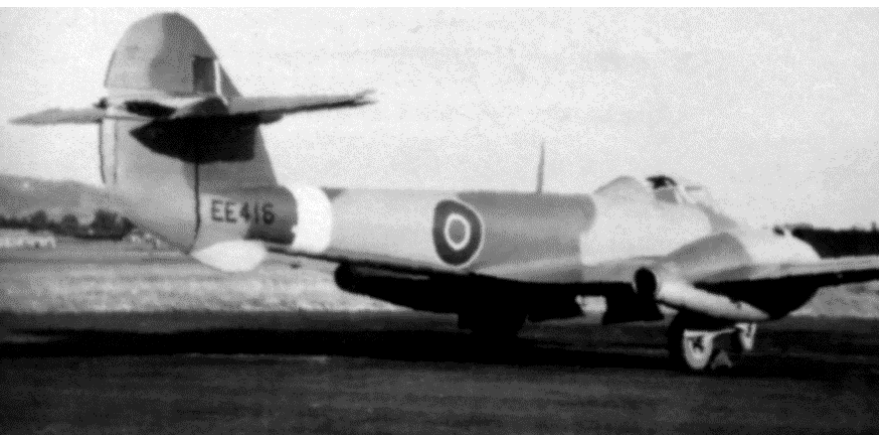


'EJECTION SEAT' FILMING AT DEFFORD 1947

Dennis Williams

Some very unusual photos have turned up. They were taken at Defford on 24th July 1947 by one of the TRE Malvern photographers. The original negative envelope is marked '**Stills of filming Pilot Ejection at Defford**' and '**J R F Stewart**'. The chap with the moustache and flying suit is **Bernard Lynch**, who carried out over 30 aircraft test ejections for **Martin Baker**.

Was there a live ejection over Defford? Certainly, the first Gloster Meteor modified for ejection seat trials was photographed on the ground at Defford in 1947 (see below). Can anyone tell us more?



The very special Meteor EE416, modified by Martin Baker for ejection seat trials, with a second cockpit behind the pilot, captured by the camera of George Stalker at Defford in 1947.

(First published in 'Contact! no.99 September 2015. Worth asking the question again four years on, now we have many new readers - can anyone tell us more? Ed)