

USAAF Liberator explodes in mid air over the Wirral

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A USAAF Consolidated Liberator takes off in the early morning light from a bomber base 'somewhere in England'

On 18 October 1944 a USAAF B24H Liberator 42-50347, "F" from the 703rd Bomb Squadron, 445th Bomb Group based at Tibenham in Norfolk was on a familiarisation flight across Britain. On board were a total 24 U.S. servicemen, many of them "replacements" who had recently arrived in Britain. On the 27th September the 445th Bomb Group had suffered devastating losses when 30 out of 37 planes had failed to return from a raid on Kassel, Germany. In the middle of the afternoon, while the plane was over the Wirral, near Liverpool, the plane exploded in mid air killing all those on board. The cause was never officially established.

It was not an unusual occurrence. A large proportion of deaths and injuries in the wartime airforces were attributable to "accidents". Nor was it an especially unusual event for those living in Britain. Earlier, during the blitz, people had been very familiar with aircraft crashes. Although casualties were unusually high due to the number of men on board, at least on this occasion nobody had been hurt on the ground. On the 23rd August 1944 another Liberator crash had killed 61 people,

including just 3 crew, when it hit the village of Freckleton, not so far away. See the [Freckleton Disaster](#) for more.

A local resident was one of the eye witnesses:

About 3.45pm I was in the upstairs back bedroom of my house, which looks out towards Landican. I heard an aeroplane making a zooming noise close by and saw an aeroplane flying at an ordinary height towards Storeton village. When the plane got into line almost between Storeton and Landican village it turned to the right very suddenly. I had the bedroom window open by this time, but I did not hear the sound of the engine.

Almost immediately, I heard a noise similar to an engine back firing. At the same time, the plane seemed to hover in the air and immediately the wings fell apart from the plane together with numerous objects. The body of the plane at once fell flat to the ground and then there was a terrific explosion which sent up thick black clouds of smoke and flames.

Another eyewitness was a local Anti Aircraft artillery officer:

I heard almost overhead an explosion similar to a shell burst, and the sound of an aircraft as in a dive. I immediately left the Control Room to ascertain what the trouble was, and on my way out a further explosion took place.

I saw the plane, which was travelling in a westerly direction, and pieces were breaking away. The plane was flying at a height of approximately 1,000 feet and was roughly 300 yards away from me when I saw it. The most part of the starboard wing and also part of the port wing was broken. The fuselage appeared to be broken just behind the trailing edge of the wing.

It was impossible in the short space of time to identify the aircraft, except that its tail was similar in design to that of a Liberator. A limited

amount of smoke was coming from the aircraft and the cause of it appeared to be the engines, only two of which could be clearly identified. The plane dived to the ground veering slightly to port all the time. Just before it hit the ground, a further explosion seemed to take place. This was not absolutely certain as the distance involved was then some 1,500 yards from my position of observation and this explosion may have taken place as the aircraft hit the ground

Crash sites and the collection of souvenirs were a particular fascination for schoolchildren.

Eileen Roberts was a ten year old schoolgirl:

On arriving at the scene we were stopped by men in uniform guarding the site. Not to be outdone, we walked into the adjoining field where my brother spotted an orange; we didn't get many of them in wartime so he picked it up. But then he threw it down again right away. The orange was tightly held in a human hand! At that moment one of the guards came over and told us to 'Get off home or else!'

We needed no second telling. It was two very subdued little children who trudged home. When we did get home, it was to find our mother in a panic looking for us. No, we didn't get counselling, but I got a severe telling off, a smacked bottom and sent straight to bed – after all I was 10 years old and should have known better.

Bruce Tasker was an older schoolboy at the Wirral Grammar School:

The weather was rainy with lowering clouds. Being used to Liberators coming and going, we did not look up until we heard a dull boom, and saw a ball of smoke in the sky over the Storeton area, with bits and pieces of aircraft fluttering to the ground”.

As curious schoolboys we peddled to Landican Lane, negotiating the rough terrain, eventually coming upon bits of metal strewn everywhere,

with an engine burning in a field on one side of the lane, and the white tail fins in a field on the other. Stopping at the railway bridge, we could see an entire gun turret lying to our right and parties of soldiers in football kit carrying stretchers looking for remains and placing them in a line under parachutes for concealment.

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Another account suggests that a schoolboy had been accidentally shot in the leg while a group of them were trying remove the percussion caps from the machine gun bullets. It was this that prompted the police to call on schools warning boys against taking souvenirs from crash sites.

The cause of the crash was not established by the official investigation, although the possibility that it was struck by lightning was considered. The aircraft was considered to be in sound mechanical condition, although an officer who had recently flown the aircraft suggested this was incorrect. Ralph Stimmel felt that the aircraft suffered from an unusually strong smell of gasoline, apparently a fairly common problem on Liberators:

The item that bothers me most is the statement that the plane had no gas leaks. It most certainly did I am afraid that the investigating body put a bit of spin on the report.

For a complete account of the known facts see 39-45war.com, including a list of the casualties.



A Consolidated B-24 Liberator from Maxwell Field, Alabama, four engine pilot school, glistens in the sun as it makes a turn at high altitude in the clouds.

Editor / October 18, / 1944 / accidents and friendly-fire

One thought on “USAAF Liberator explodes in mid air over the Wirral”

Jason M. Pilalas

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The Stimmel report is a very likely reason for this accident. Liberators were notorious for leaks in the fuel transfer system, and smoking was usually forbidden among crews. To make the situation even worse, transferring fuel creates static electricity, and sparks and fumes are unhealthy for aircraft and crews. Among many others, it is likely this reason which caused the loss of LT Joseph P. Kennedy USNR and his co-pilot.

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