



SWANSEA DEMON TRAGEDY NO 2

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Author: W. Dearing, August 2022

In our last newsletter we wrote the story of the tragic death of two spectators at an air show at Swansea on Tasmania's east coast.

The two spectators killed were Mrs Louisa Cotton and her daughter Jean, who were stuck by a RAAF Hawker Demon aircraft, that failed to become airborne. Mrs Cotton was attending the air show with her husband, daughter Jean and younger son Maxwell. Both her husband and son were unharmed but fate was yet to play a further cruel blow to the east coast family.

Maxwell Tylney Cotton was born in May 1921 but with the outbreak of World War 2 enlisted in the RAAF in April 1941 aged 19 years as a trainee pilot. Maxwell received his initial flying instruction with No 7 Elementary Flying Training School at Western Junction and on completion was transferred to Halifax, Canada to undertake his operational training.

Maxwell embarked for the UK in October 1941 and after a brief posting to No 75 Squadron joined No 263 Squadron RAF and began his operational flying as a pilot of a Westland Whirlwind in July 1942.



Courtesy Australian War Memorial

The Westland Whirlwind was the first cannon-armed fighter for the RAF, first flown in October 1938 and at the production stage by 1940. It was a twin engine heavy fighter (also able to



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function as a fighter bomber with 500-pound bombload). With four 20mm Hispano cannons in the nose, it was more powerful than an eight-gunned fighter like the Spitfire or Hurricane. It was fast, matching or exceeding the current Spitfire's maximum speed, but performed best at low altitude and was used for convoy escort and against small targets in the English Channel and northern France. Only 114 were produced (compared with over 20,000 Spitfires).

No. 263 Squadron flew Whirlwinds until the end of 1943, with the three years' operating the type being spent in the west of the country: two years in airfields around Wiltshire, Dorset and Gloucestershire, six months in south Wales, and six months in Devon and Cornwall. Apart from periods of training and "rest and recuperation," the squadron's operations involved: air-ground attacks on airfields, railways and roads in northern France; air-sea attacks on enemy shipping (E-boats and armed trawlers); sea convoy escort; and bomber escort.



File Photograph of a Westland Whirlwind of No 263 Squadron

Maxwell proved to be a fearless pilot who as this record of incidents recalls.

On the 28th of April 1943 during a Roadstead operation, flying Whirlwind P6981 he was hit but managed to return safely to base where an 18inch hole was discovered in his starboard wing. Again, on the 23rd May 1943, he managed to return to base with his starboard tank holed by an unexploded 20 mill shell. Thirty gallons of fuel flowed out before the tank sealed itself. The Whirlwind was found to have a fuselage peppered with holes. After four attempts, and with his rudder partially jammed he managed to safely land his damaged aircraft.



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(Extract from 263 Squadron's Operational Reports)

On the 15th June 1943 at 5:43am Maxwell, leading his section of 4 Whirlwinds, took off for an armed reconnaissance in the Channel Island area. Sighting a convoy of four minesweepers and an armed trawler they engaged the enemy despite heavy and accurate flak. Maxwell dropped his bomb accurately but was hit by the flak. His aircraft was seen to be diving away in a ball of flame and disintegrated as it hit the sea. Observing pilots concluded he would have perished in the incident.

His body was never recovered and he is commemorated on the Runnymede Air Forces Memorial

On the 6th July 1942 Pilot Officer Maxwell Tyney Cotton was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.



With Maxwell's death fate closed a tragic series of events for Swansea's Cotton family. A wife, a daughter and a son all taken by aviation incidents. A family's tragic story in Tasmania's aviation history