

Newspaper article – The remains of Spitfire AD 540 are airlifted from lonely hillside 51 years after it crashed

The remains of Spitfire AD 540, which crashed 51 years ago on a Galloway hillside, took to the skies again recently when they were airlifted by a Sea King helicopter from 819 Naval Squadron at Prestwick.

The fighter aircraft crashed on patrol over the Firth of Clyde on May 23, 1942. Its pilot was David Hunter Blair of Blairquhan, Straiton.

Enemy aircraft had been reported over South Ayrshire, and it was while searching for these planes that the Spitfire was seen to behave erratically and crash on the slopes of Cairnsmore of Carsphairn.

Jim McGarvie, a farm worker, saw the aircraft come down, but found no trace of the pilot when he reached the site. Smoke rising from another hill was found to be the burning remnants of David Hunter Blair's parachute. *It had failed to save him.*

A recovery crew dismantled the downed plane and took away all re-usable parts, burying the damaged sections on the unmarked site.

The Spitfire had been "bought" by the town of Newmarket in Suffolk and was named 'Blue Peter' after the horse which won the Derby in 1939.

The aircraft was allocated to 242 Squadron at RAF Ayr with the official number AD 540, and was flown on a regular basis by Pilot Officer Hunter Blair.

The story of the gallant fighter pilot who died tragically so near his home was retold 20 years ago when a search for the remains of his plane was started by the Dumfries and Galloway Aviation Museum. But nothing was found after several weeks and the search stopped.

It was renewed recently when BBC television's *Blue Peter* expressed an interest in filming a search and a report in the Galloway News brought forward a number of people with memories of the tragic event of that day in 1942.

Information provided by local men Tom Gordon and Jim Bell was particularly useful in narrowing the search area, but a number of visits to the area, usually in poor weather conditions, proved fruitless.

Then on Sunday, May 23, this year – 51 years to the day after the aircraft crashed – one of the searchers, Ralph Davidson, found a piece of the plane as the weary party returned to their vehicles after another long day in the hills.

The unearthing of the aircraft's Merlin engine, half the starboard wing and various other small parts, was filmed by *Blue Peter*.

But it soon became clear that the removal of the parts from the crash site was going to be a major problem. The site was a three mile hike from the nearest road!

It was at this point that the landowner, Mr Colin Campbell, contacted the Royal Navy to see if they could help with the problem. Links with the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton in Somerset had been established over a number of years and assistance had been rendered on a variety of historical projects.

Sea King helicopter crews often practise load-lifting techniques and the request was seen as a valuable opportunity to test these skills. Lieutenant Guy Randall and his crew lifted the various loads from the crash site throughout the afternoon of July 12 while a ground team, led by Petty Officer John Peacock, netted the loads and supervised their transfer to the Museum's transport.

Parts from "Blue Peter" are currently on display at the Dumfries and Galloway Aviation Museum alongside remnants of another Spitfire, a Mk 11-P7540, which were recovered at Loch Doon.