

Press Release from the Farnborough Air Sciences Trust (FAST)

Monday 18th January marks the 70th Anniversary of the crash of a German Aircraft on Cove Junior School.

During the Second World War captured German aircraft were brought to the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) for evaluation and with the cessation of hostilities many more were brought over from the airfields and factories.

One of these aircraft was a twin seat Dornier 335A-12 which arrived on 8 September 1945 and formed part of an exhibition of captured German aircraft in November 1945 – early 1946. It had been surrendered to the US forces at the Dornier factory at Oberpfaffenhofen, near Munich and flown to Neubiberg airfield and handed over to British Air Intelligence Officers. RAE test pilot S/Ldr McCarthy flew it to Strasbourg and on to Reims on 7 Sept 1945. The following day it flew to Manston and then RAE Farnborough where it arrived at 16.25 hours. The aircraft was allocated Air Ministry serial AM223 whilst at Farnborough. It next flew on 29 September 1945 when a test flight took place but it would appear that it did not fly again until the fateful day of 18 January 1946.

On that day, the Commanding Officer of Experimental Flying at the RAE, Group Captain A. F. Hards, was flying the twin engine “push-pull” Dornier 335 that was being evaluated after capture at the end of the war. This was the A-12 two seat trainer version of a very large German fighter which featured a unique configuration with engines at the front and rear fuselage, with propellers at the nose and tail. It was a very fast aircraft for its time with a top speed of over 400mph but had a poor reputation for reliability and had been developed too late in the war to be a danger to attacking Allied bomber. The aircraft had departed RAE at 11.30am and crashed around mid-day.

Legendary test pilot Captain Eric Winkle Brown writes “On my return to Farnborough, The CO, Grp Capt AF Hards, asked me to check him out for a solo trip in our two-seat Dornier 335 and on 18 January 1946 he went off solo. As he returned to the airfield we could see that the rear engine was on fire and we hoped that he would land on the nearest runway. Whether he was unaware of the fire or felt it safer to attempt his first landing in this strange German bird into wind will never be known, but he continued around the circuit as if no emergency existed, heading for the duty runway. He had covered roughly two-thirds of the circuit when the Dornier suddenly plunged vertically into a school-house in Cove village. The elevator control cables had obviously burnt through and Grp Capt Hards had no chance to eject.” #

The aircraft went out of control and dived towards the ground coming down initially in a field at the back of the headmasters house (Mr John Gilderdale). It then bounced, hit the garage roof, then went into the top of the house and large parts then flew off into the school and across the road. The pilot was found dead in the headmaster’s bedroom. Although the house was destroyed, and later demolished, two people downstairs at the time were uninjured. There were some injuries to a few children but none seriously. The aircraft was completely destroyed.

Farnborough Air Sciences Trust volunteer Malcolm Warren was six and half years old and a pupil at the school. He remembers being in the school dining hall and hearing a loud bang then looking round out the window seeing a mass of flames. The next thing he remembers is being outside and noticing that there were no flames or smoke. He recalls that neither he nor the other children were frightened or cried. The school was closed for sometime but when the children returned the wreckage was still in the playground.

For a number of years afterwards, the school retained an aircraft in its crest as a reminder of the accident.

Experimental test flying and evaluation of the 60 German warplanes captured during the war was a major task at RAE, as was the close examination of documentation relating to their design and maintenance, and a vast number of seized documents describing very advanced new jet and rocket powered aircraft and missiles that never flew due to the ending of hostilities in 1945. After this accident there was really no more testing of ex German aircraft undertaken at Farnborough although a few transport aircraft continued in the transport/communications role for a further few years.

“Wings of the Luftwaffe Flying the captured German aircraft of World War II” Hikoki Publications 2010 available the FAST Museum Shop or at <http://www.fastmuseumshop.org.uk/>

Images from the FAST Museum Collection



German and British Aircraft on display at the RAE early in 1946



Dornier Do 335-12 AM223 (W/Nr 240112 is seen here at Farnborough on 11th September 1945, three days after its arrival. This two-seat aircraft crashed on Cove Junior School on 18th January 1946, with Group Captain A F Hards losing his life.



18th Jan 1946 Wreckage of aircraft and damage to the Headmaster's House at Cove Junior School



Damage in Cove Junior School yard including to childrens' bicycles