

## Mystery of the missing Spitfire

Geoff Cox was 15 years old and standing by the lychgate of Teston Church at 7pm on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1940. Years later he painted this dramatic picture to crystallise his recollection: a Spitfire in flames passing behind the church and crashing into the Medway valley below. It was the height of the Battle of Britain, which was being fought in the skies above Kent.



We know from local records that the pilot was a young Australian, Frank Cale, of 266 Squadron, based at Hornchurch, and the aircraft was N3168. We know that it was shot down by a Bf 109 and that Frank Cale baled out. His parachute harness was burned and he may already have been fatally wounded. His body was found in the river the next day, and the harness, badly burned, was found in a nearby orchard.

*But what happened to the plane?* For the past year, the Battle of Britain Museum at Hawkinge near Folkestone has been looking for it along the Medway, using a very sensitive metal detector capable of finding metal 5m underground. The search has been dogged by the wet weather. Every field on both sides of the river has been scoured, without success. But as Lifeline went to press, tantalising clues were found: large quantities of old, molten aluminium, scattered in a field south of the river and close to Teston Bridge.

Is the molten metal from the missing N3168? The investigation by the Battle of Britain Museum is ongoing. We will provide an update next month. **If you know anyone who might be able to help with this search, please contact the editors.**

|                              |    |  |            |
|------------------------------|----|--|------------|
| Middle Wallop Sqn., Northolt | NC | killed. Engine caught fire between Northolt and Hendon and aircraft crashed in street near Harrow-on-the-Hill; pilot baled out unhurt. | 12.00 hrs  |
| Sqn., Hornchurch             | C  | Shot down by He 115, 12 miles east of Deal; pilot killed.  | A16.30 hrs |
| Sqn., Hornchurch             | C  | Shot down by Bf 109s at Teston, near Maidstone; pilot's body recovered from R. Medway next day.  | A19.00 hrs |
| Sqn., Northolt               | C  | Damaged in ground accident; pilot unhurt.  | Not known  |
| Sqn., Northolt               | C  | Damaged in ground accident; pilot unhurt.  | Not known  |
| Sqn., Northolt               | C  | Damaged in ground accident; pilot unhurt.  | Not known  |
| Sqn., Gravesend              | C  | Shot down south of Folkestone; pilot baled out and rescued unhurt.   | A11.30 hrs |
| Sqn., Gravesend              | C  | Shot down south of Folkestone but crashed on land; pilot unhurt.   | A11.30 hrs |
|                              |    | between Selsey and   | A17.40 hrs |

## Mystery of the missing Spitfire (Part II)

Last month, we published Geoff Cox's dramatic painting of N3168 in flames above Teston Church. A few moments later, it crashed into the Medway valley, very close to the water. Sadly the pilot, a young Australian called Frank Cale, was killed and his body was recovered from the river the next day. The Battle of Britain museum at Hawkinge has been searching for the wreckage of the Spitfire without success.

There was some excitement as we went to press last month, because quantities of melted aluminum had just been found in a field by the river, just on our side of Teston Bridge. Alas, further investigation suggests that these fragments are not from the missing aircraft and may be detritus from the Bailey Bridge which was installed there for some years during the 1970s, while the stone bridge was being repaired.

However we have been given fresh insight from a letter written by a fellow pilot - (later Squadron Ldr) W Ross Jones who was flying that day, 15<sup>th</sup> Aug 1940. It gives on a graphic sense of the extraordinary determination and bravery of the Few. Here is an extract. *Note that it was Ross Jones' 5<sup>th</sup> sortie of the day.*

*15th Aug 1940 a memorable, if not a disastrous day, we claimed 12 enemy aircraft destroyed, six damaged, but tragically we lost Pilot Sgt Hemsley, Co S/Ldr Wilkenson, P/O Cale, P/O Bowen, Sub/Lt Greenshield RN (FAA). F/Lt Bazlay survived his "baling out". P/O Sodan injured in combat but landed safely at base – Manston – yet at 5.30pm I went on my 5th sortie of the day primarily to look for our missing pilots, mid channel, encountered a HE115 kind of air Sea/Rescue float plane – made a pass at him – but thinking he might be picking up some of "ours" and theirs, left him to carry on his good and/or bad work!*

*This was of course the peak daylight raids on London – 300 plus enemy aircraft mainly JU88s. Some HE111s, under cover of ME109 and the Fw190, the Hurricanes of course had a meal with the bombers, whilst we "spits" had as always the high cover to contend with, with dire results.*

*I was with him [Frank Cale] when he was shot down (I was flying N3127). Cale was flying N3168 and I hazard to guess that Frankie Cale might have been mortally wounded before "baling out" but I've a feeling that he may well have been "shot" whilst floating down, since in the same encounter, our Flight Commander F/Lt Bazlay was shot down, and baled out and whilst floating down he was being "shot at" by a ME109 and I chased the b\*\*\*\*\*d and gave him 2 x 5 second bursts. The last I saw of him, was at low level over the coast by Margate – whether he managed to survive I do know or even cared. I claimed one ME109 damaged, not that anybody cared – but thankfully Bazlay landed safely in Kent only to survive a few more months.*

**The search for the missing plane goes on. We will report any progress in next month's Lifeline.**



### **Mystery of the missing Spitfire (Part III)**

Last month, we published an extract from a letter by Squadron Leader W Ross Jones, describing the events of 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1940, a critical day in the Battle of Britain. Ross Jones was with Frank Cale when he was shot down and killed over the Medway.

Since then, our inbox had been humming with new reports, most notably the notes from a Teston History Society talk given by Geoff Cox (who painted that dramatic picture of Frank Cale's Spitfire in flames above Teston Church).

Mr Cox, aged 12 at the time, also witnessed other dramatic moments, including the crash-landing of a French pilot - who was taken off to the North Pole pub for a drink (reproduced to the right). We have uploaded these notes (4 pages) to the website [www.thefarleighs.co.uk](http://www.thefarleighs.co.uk).

And long-time Farleigh resident Jack Martin, who was 3 years old in 1940, contacted us with the following fascinating recollection:

"My grandfather owned Teston Garage, on the left past Teston House. Mr Cooper, a local farmer owned an orchard below the garage and my Dad, Stanley Martin, kept chickens on the orchard. When there were dogfights, we all got under the table in the kitchen."

"One day there was a dogfight while we were feeding the chickens and my Dad said 'It's crashed down.' He put me in his bucket (they used to carry me around in a bucket!) and we ran down from the orchard, across the railway line to the river. There was a plane against a willow tree, close to the river but not actually on the bank or in the water. It was pancake flat. There were some people there already. There was a man sitting on one wing, smoking. I thought it was the pilot....I looked for the plane later *but it was gone.*" [Editor's italics]

Now, *was this Frank Cale's Spitfire?* In which case, it must have been removed by an RAF recovery squad and the reason the metal detectors of the BoB Museum have found nothing is because *there is nothing now to find.* Or did Jack Martin, like Geoff Cox, witness the crash landing of the khaki-clad French pilot Henri Lafont, enjoying a cigarette to celebrate his lucky escape? [Henri Lafont, by the way, became a French war hero and eventually Director of the Paris Airshow from 1967 to 1984.]

Further research is underway. We will have more to share next month in Part IV.



### **Mystery of the missing Spitfire (Part IV)**

What we now know, thanks to the information provided by Geoff Cox's lecture notes, and historic records is that TWO British fighter aircraft came down near Teston Bridge during the war. One was Frank Cale's Spitfire which undoubtedly crashed on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1940.

The next incident - was a lunchtime - scraping noise - plane landed on its belly - slid across 2 fields - Tonbridge road - landed on the embankment of the railway line

We set off in hot pursuit

Pilot emerged in - in KHAKI - couldn't work out why - He was French - Henri Lafonte ! and the local farmer Mr Cooper took him to the North Pole pub for a drink. After the war Henri Lafonte was in Charge of Charles de Gaulle airport

One other aircraft crashed in Teston a Hurricane landed in the woods at Teston - we saw the wreck - there was nothing left but the cockpit but pilot got out with only bruising.

Although most engagements took place at a great height - on one occasion when I was in the garden - a Spitfire went over very low, banked steeply and swerved away - another aircraft - and I saw a business end of a Messerschmitt A109 - in hot pursuit - I don't know what happened in the end of those two.

The other was a Hurricane flown by an intrepid Frenchman which Geoff Cox recounted to the Teston History Society (see insert opposite):

The next incident - was a lunchtime - scraping noise - plane landed on its belly - slid across 2 fields - Tonbridge road - landed on the embankment of the railway line

We set off in hot pursuit

Pilot emerged in - in KHAKI - couldn't work out why - He was French - Henri Lafonte ! and the local farmer Mr Cooper took him to the North Pole pub for a drink. After the war Henri Lafonte was in Charge of Charles de Gaulle airport

**Historic note:** Any man who can head off to the North Pole for a drink after a near-death experience must have nerves of steel, and that was Henry Lafont. He was training in Oran, N. Africa when France capitulated in 1940, and scuttled its own fleet. He was so incensed by this surrender that he and 5 other airmen escaped to Gibraltar, flying a twin engine plane which barely stayed above the waves because its propellers had been bent to make such a flight impossible.

Now our own West Farleigh resident Jack Martin remembers this:

One day there was a dogfight ... and my Dad said 'It's crashed down.' He put me in his bucket (they used to carry me around in a bucket!) and we ran down from the orchard, across the railway line to the river.

There was a plane against a willow tree, close to the river but not actually on the bank or in the water. It was pancake flat. There were some people there already... I looked for the plane later *but it was gone.*"

The Battle of Britain Museum at first believed that 3 year old Jack Martin had witnessed Henri Lafont's wrecked Hurricane. But we can now be reasonably sure that it wasn't. For one thing, Jack's Dad said it was a Spitfire. "*He was in the Observer Corps, so he should know,*" said Jack. But – and this seems conclusive - Henri Lafont's crash landing at Teston wasn't until October of that year. And Jack is certain that this event took place in August. In August, Lafont was still at Old Sarum, training on Tiger Moths.

So in this writer's opinion, the most likely though disappointing solution to the mystery of Jack Cale's missing Spitfire is this: the aircraft came down in one piece, as Jack Martin and his Dad witnessed it. And it was removed, presumably by the RAF's recovery squad which is why young Jack looked for it later *but it was gone*. In short, the metal detectors of the Battle of Britain Museum have found nothing is because there is nothing now to find. It is only the record of its removal that is missing. But the Museum has one more field to check...