

AC2 S.H.Smith – Royal Air Force

Sidney Herbert Smith was born on 13th March 1917 and was the son of Herbert and Edith Smith who lived at 1 Watson Road, Westcott. In later years Edith lived at 2 Deerleap Cottages, Wotton.

At the start of the war Sidney was serving with the Royal Air Force as an Aircraftsman 2nd Class (AC2) in 79 Squadron, based at Manston, Kent. The Squadron was equipped with Hawker Hurricane fighter aircraft which were later to be of crucial importance in the Battle of Britain. As the RAF station nearest to continental Europe, Manston had a key role in intercepting enemy aircraft approaching the coast; it was also very exposed to enemy attack.

Sidney Smith was a member of a ground crew responsible for servicing a Hurricane flown by Pilot Officer Thomas S.Lewis. On 2nd January 1940, PO Lewis asked his Flight Commander, Flying Officer Davies, for permission to take his ground crew for a flight in a 2 seater Miles Magister trainer aircraft. Davies agreed, the flight was formally authorised and Lewis took off in Magister P2508 with Leading Aircraftsman Needham as his passenger. Davies watched the flight and later stated that he saw them climb to 2000 feet, when the aircraft rolled on its back and descended in an inverted glide, finally pulling out at about 200 feet. After the Magister landed Davies questioned Lewis about the flight and told him that if he did such aerobatics again, he would be grounded. In the meantime he would report the incident to the Commanding Officer.

PO Lewis then took Sidney Smith up and the Magister was seen to taxi off at excessive speed. Two RAF witnesses, who were home on leave in the area, reported seeing the aircraft carrying out aerobatics, including some inverted flying, at between 1000 and 1500 feet. One of the witnesses saw the aircraft go into a near-vertical dive and disappear from view, followed by the sound of a crash. Both men on board died in the impact near Margate.

At the Court of Inquiry into the crash, FO Davies stated that PO Lewis was normally a careful pilot, although inclined to be temperamental and required tact in handling. The Court found that the cause of the accident was the pilot executing aerobatics at low altitude; although the possibility of obstruction of the controls in the rear cockpit by the passenger could not be dismissed.

Sidney Smith was brought back to Westcott for burial and his grave is in Plot 11, Row D in Holy Trinity extension churchyard, the entrance to which is about 100 yards south of the church on the southern side of Logmore Lane. Thomas Lewis was buried in Cardiff (Llanishen) Cemetery.

In May 1940, 79 Squadron moved to France at the start of the German offensive and were stationed at Mons en Chausse but the German advance forced their evacuation ten days later. They were then stationed at Biggin Hill and Acklington, Northumberland for the Battle of Britain before being withdrawn to South Wales. In September 1942 the Squadron moved to India and were engaged in the Burma campaign until the end of the war.