





Left: North Front airfield photographed by the RAF looking east five months after the accident (Crown Copyright).

Above: The runway today showing the post-war extension at the western end. The round island on the left is the radar mole.



# The Controversy

By the evening of Monday, July 5, 1943, German radio was broadcasting throughout Europe the first allegation that the British Secret Service had murdered General Sikorski. The General's death was immediately coupled to the assassination of Admiral Darlan six months previously in North Africa and, it was claimed by the German propaganda machine, that both men had policies which had proved troublesome to the British Government. However easily one can dismiss these early allegations as sheer mischief-making, the first seeds had been sown in a controversy which has lasted to the present day.

The Court of Inquiry to establish the cause of the crash was opened at Air Headquarters, Gibraltar, on July 7, 1943 and was presided over by Group Captain J. G. Elton DFC, AFC. Altogether 28 witnesses were called including the pilot who had recovered from his injuries. The fact that the pilot was the only one to survive the crash has led many arm-chair investigators to suggest that Flight Lieutenant Prchal crashed the Liberator deliberately with the intention of killing the General. To back up this theory, the description of events by General Mason-Macfarlane (from which we have already quoted) is often used:

'There was one very extraordinary fact. The pilot, like nearly all pilots, had his idiosyncracies, and he never, under any circumstances, wore his Mae West either taking off or landing. He had his Mae West hung over the back of his seat where it would be handy if required. He stoutly maintained in evidence that he had not departed from his usual practice, and that when he started his take-off run, he was not wearing his Mae West. The fact remains that when he was picked up out of the water he was found to be not only wearing his Mae West, but every tape and fastening had been properly put on and done up.'

However, the General goes on to qualify this statement with his personal explanation of the crash:

'Personally, I am reasonably convinced that the accident was definitely one which falls into the category of the human element. Although when I said "goodbye" to Prchal just before he climbed aboard he appeared absolutely normal, I think that he must have had some form of mental aberration which led him, for the first time in years, to put on his Mae West. I think that this mental aberration ceased while he was actually taking off, but that it came on again almost at once, that in the darkness he lost his horizon, and that, in fact, he flew the aircraft inexorably straight into the sea without realising what he was doing until the very last second when it was too late to do anything except switch off his engines. All this is further corroborated by the fact that, when the aircraft hit the water, the undercarriage was still down and locked in the "down" position whereas, normally, any pilot would pull up his undercarriage within a matter of seconds of becoming airborne. Many of us on the Rock indulged in a great deal of thought and speculation regarding how such an inexplicable crash should have occurred, and all those whose judgement I value, including my AOC, finally agreed with me that the disaster was clearly due either to an error of judgement or, more likely, a temporary blackout on the part of the pilot.'

'The question of sabotage was also raised' wrote General Mason-Macfarlane 'but rejected as the machine had a Commando and RAF guard on her during the whole stay on Gibraltar aerodrome while Sikorski was on the Rock'.

Certified True Copy.

(12) Wt. 27731-1629 10,000 9/43 T.S. 700 ROYAL AIR FORCE R.A.F. Form 412

## PROCEEDINGS OF COURT OF INQUIRY OR INVESTIGATION

opened on (date) 7th July 1943.

at (place) Air Headquarters, Gibraltar.

by order of Air Marshal Sir J.C. Stessor.

to inquire into the FLYING ACCIDENT on (date) 4th July '43

at (place) North Front K.C.B., D.S.O., M.C. Gibraltar.

(nearest town)

\*Here insert any special terms of reference.

(i) To establish the facts called for in the Findings set out below.

(ii) To give an opinion as to the cause of the accident, the degree of responsibility of any person concerned (see R.R. & A.C.I., para. 1319 (3)), and if thought desirable, to make recommendations.

(iii) To inquire specially into\*

### COMPOSITION OF THE COURT (OR NAME OF INVESTIGATING OFFICER)

	Rank	Name	Unit
President	Group Captain	J.G. Elton. D.F.C., A.F.C.	R.A.F. Stn. Turnberry.
Members (a)	Wing Commander	A.W. Kay.	H.Q. Coastal Command.
	Squadron Leader	D.M. Wellings. D.F.C.	A.H.Q. Gibraltar.
	(Wing Commander	N.M.S. Russell.	H.Q. Transport Command.
In attendance (a)	(Wing Commander	S. Dudginski.	Inspectorate General.
			Polish Air Force.

### LIST OF WITNESSES

Rank	Name	Unit (if civilian say so)	Rank	Name	Unit (if civilian say so)
F/Lt.	E.H. Prchal.	511 Sqdn.	AG1.	D. Qualtrough.	179 Sqdn.
C/Capt.	G.W. Holland.	R.A.F.	LAC.	H.D. Tisdale.	179 Sqdn.
		North Front	LAC.	E.R. Howes.	S.E.P.N./Front
Captain.	J.L. Williams.	King's Regt.	Flt. Lieut.	A.M. Fosgate.	71 ASH Unit.
Serjeant.	N.J. Moore.	511 Sqdn.	Flt. Lieut.	I.P. Fraser.	R.A.F./Front.
Corporal.	W.A. Davis.	511 Sqdn.	Corporal	K.J. Alexander.	511 Sqdn.
Corporal.	F.W. Hoppered.	511 Sqdn.	LAC.	J.F. Miles.	511 Sqdn.
W.C.	H.D. Gibbs.	511 Sqdn.	Pilot Off.	H.V. Briggs.	27 A.D.R.U.
Flt. Lieut.	R.B. Capes.	A.H.Q. Gib.	Flt. Lieut.	R.S. Coleman.	27 A.D.R.U.
A/Cdr.	S.P. Simpson.	A.H.Q. Gib.	Flt. Lieut.	A.J. Perry.	A.H.Q. Gib.

### I. Description of aircraft.

Type and Mark	Dual or single control	Damage to Airframe (c)	Engine(s) Type and Series	Engine Number(s) A.M. No.	Makers No.	Damage to Engine(s) (d)	Whether aircraft was fit for the flight
Liberator II	Dual	Total	Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp	1. 8637	204870.	Total	Fit.
				2. 5570	241578.	"	
				3. 11092	263156.	"	
			R1830.S3C4G	4. 10709	263043.	"	

### Description of Occupants.

Name (e)	Rank	Unit	Duty, e.g. Pilot, A.G. etc.	No. of aircraft in which he was occupant	Where seated	Extent injured (f)
E.H. Prchal.	F/Lt.	511 Sqdn.	Capt. & 1st Pilot.	1.	1st Pilot st.	Seriously.
W.S. Herring.	S/Ldr.	"	2nd Pilot	523.	2nd "	Missing.
L. Zalsberg.	W.O.	"	Navigator.	"	Normal.	Fatally.
F. Kelly.	Sgt.	"	Flt. Engineer.	"	"	"
C.B. Gerrie.	F/Sgt.	"	WOP/AG.	"	"	"
D. Hunter.	F/Sgt.	"	"	"	"	Missing.
W. Sikorski.	General.	Polish Fcs.	Passenger.	"	"	Fatally.
Klimecki.	Maj-Gen.	"	"	"	"	"
Karecki.	Col.	"	"	"	"	"
V. Cazalot.	Col.	Brit. Army.	"	"	"	"
J.P. Whiteley.	Brig.	"	"	"	"	"
Porikiewski.	Lieut.	Polish Fcs.	"	"	"	"

The first page of the report on the proceedings of the Court of Inquiry held at Gibraltar. There were nine additional witnesses and five other occupants who are listed on a continuation sheet. (From Public Record Office file AIR 2/9234 Crown Copyright).

Flight Lieutenant Prchal's own explanation was given during his cross-examination when called as the first witness at the Court of Inquiry:

'I am a pilot in No. 511 Squadron, and on July 4th 1943 I was captain of Liberator aircraft No. AL523. On 3rd July 1943 I landed at Gibraltar at approximately 1630 hours having flown from Cairo West. The aircraft was in every way serviceable. After landing the aircraft was "D.Ied" by my Flight Engineer, and also by the ground staff of 511 Squadron at Gibraltar. On 4th July 1943, at approximately 2240 I went aboard the aircraft and was satisfied everything was in order. I did not see where the passengers were seated, but before we started the engines the Flight Engineer reported to me that all the passengers were properly seated. There were eleven passengers, five of whom were in the bomb bay and six in the fuselage. This was one more than when we took off from Cairo, the extra passenger being seated in the bomb bay. The all up weight was approximately 52,000 lbs. I was quite satisfied with the

disposal of the load. I started my engines and warmed them up, and then proceeded to the end of the runway where I ran them up and did the normal cockpit check. Everything was satisfactory. I received the "green" signal at 2310 hours and commenced to take off. At about 130 m.p.h. I was airborne. When I was at about 150 feet I eased the control column forward to gather speed. My speed built up to 165 m.p.h. I wanted to climb again so attempted to pull back the control column but I could not do so. The control column was definitely locked. I told my second pilot over the inter-communication to check over the controls quickly. At this time the undercarriage was fully up and the flaps half-down, that is normal take off position. When I found I was unable to move the control column I put on trim in an endeavour to gain height, but nothing happened. All this time I was pulling back on the control column but could not move it backwards. I got no reply from the second pilot over the inter-communication and the aircraft was rapidly approaching the water. I then shouted out "crash landing" to