

Air accident account of Liberator AL523 on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1943 at Gibraltar compiled by C.W.T. Walker  
of 172 Squadron, Coastal Command, R.A.F.

Leading Aircraftsman, trained at 'Squires Gate' Blackpool for 16-weeks. Qualified as A.C.1 Airframes.

After the war, Technical College for 2-yrs to qualify as a Merchant Navy Radio Officer. Qualified as P.M.G 1<sup>st</sup> class with Radar Endorsement. Qualifications at retirement: Technician engineer M.S.E.R.T\* and lecturer at Hull Technical College.

(\* Member of the Society of Electronic and Radio Technicians.)

INTRODUCTION

The air accident led to the drowning of General Sikorski and his Entourage along with other passengers.

NORTH FRONT AIRFIELD GIBRALTAR

See layout Figure 1, which shows the parked Liberator close to a Perimeter road parallel to a high chain mesh which served as the Frontier to Spain. The service road terminated at the Ablutions Block (Ab on Figure). The Frontier mesh went into the Mediterranean Sea. Next to the Liberator was our Billets of 172 Squadron along with the workshops and parked Wellington Aircraft. At the far side of the Liberator was a squadron of Lockheed Hudsons. The NAAFI was near the Control Tower and the limestone rock-face. A service road ran parallel to the rock-face to the road into Gibraltar Town. The Main road from the town crossed the single runway to the Spanish and British Frontier control gates.

The Runway was being finished with a 'T' turning area; this extended the runway about 500-yards into the water of Gibraltar Bay. This Extension enabled larger or faster aircraft to 'Land' or 'Take-off' more safely.

NOTE. All incoming aircraft would fly in over Gibraltar Bay. Outbound aircraft started from the extension to fly over the Mediterranean Sea and turn right to fly around the Rock and out over the 'Straits' onwards. This was to reduce the effect of the German Observation Post who phoned through to Ronda to the German H.Q.

GIBRALTAR Local-time and G.M.T

The 'Rock' was regarded as an 'off-shore' island, so, when Britain's clocks changed so did the local-

time. By July, Britain had changed to 'Double Summertime' to conserve fuel. This applied to the local-time on the Rock. Examples: 12 noon local was 10 am G.M.T.

### WEATHER

Conditions over the two days July 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> was dry, hot and cloudless; the Mediterranean Sea was calm.

### THE LIBERATOR AIRCRAFT

#### EXTERNAL Observation revealed:

It was un-armed, had no bomb-doors. No 'Astradome' – the dome in the fuselage roof, which also served as an escape-route as it hinged down. There was no 'Loop-aerial', which could be used with a Receiver switched to Direction Finding (RDF). Again an essential system when flying over an ocean.

Aircraft colour scheme: War-time A/C were either painted black for night flying or shades of white for daylight aircraft. This Liberator was white.

#### INTERNAL examination:

The cargo-door was open, with no one around. Examination showed the internal space was roughly halved and had 2 floors. The cargo was on the top, with the sill at shoulder height. The floor across was corrugated metal and went as far as I could see forward and towards the tail unit.

Wooden duck-boards ran down the middle. With no windows it was too dark to see very far front or rear.

To support the fuselage skin there were many light alloy formers 'ovoid' shaped, so at the floor level, the formers had large holes to reduce the weight of metal used. The large holes tapered down, with the smallest towards the roof.

CONTROL-RODS The rods were about 1-inch in diameter on the starboard side. Long lengths of tubing were coupled together by universal 'knuckle-joints' to allow for fuselage curvature. Two joints were opposite me, each above the other and held in a large hole by 3 rollers to provide a snug fit (see Figure 2). The upper rod I assume was to move the Rudder; the lower rod the Elevators. External to the aircraft the Rudder and Elevators had some form of 'Locking' as in level flight. There were no wire cables. The lower one was roughly 5 +/- 1 foot from the floor. The Rudder knuckle a foot higher.

COMMENT I thought this arrangement to control large flight surfaces as a strong lightweight control system, without backlash.

### EARLY EVENING ON JULY 4<sup>th</sup>

Roughly 1.5 hours before the accident I left the N.A.A.F.I. about 9pm local time. Crossing the airfield to go to my Billet-hut, I noticed a crowd of uniformed people behind a 3-ton covered lorry. The lorry was tucked close to the fuselage of the Liberator with the tailgate down. Men within the lorry were bringing all sorts of boxes and crates to be transferred forward into the dark forward hold.

COMMENT This loading concerned me as there was no Aircrew or worthy Ground-crew to supervise distribution and securing the additional cargo. Are the boxes secured properly and not interfering with controls? Anything loose becomes 'floating cargo' during a flight.

While watching I noticed under the port wing an open personnel-door to give access to the lower floor. Is that where these passengers go?

Seeing an RAF chap stood near the tail-plane, I went over to him and enquired 'What's going on?'. His reply was that the passengers have been here since 8 o'clock and the Aircrew have not arrived yet. My next question was 'Who is supervising the loading?'. The answer was 'They are.', but he didn't seem to be concerned.

As I left the scene, my thought was; I hope they know what they are doing.

### The ACCIDENT.

#### The Liberator crashes into the Mediterranean Sea.

I was in my Billet (labelled B1 in Fig. 1). Just after 10pm (local time), I heard the four engines being started up and running smoothly. Then it taxied out between the rows of parked aircraft. Then heard it taxi along the Runway down to the Extension. Then the aircraft stopped with the engines idling for about 20 or more minutes. I have never heard an aircraft do that before. While listening I wondered 'What's wrong?' I knew the Control Tower would have closed the Frontier to Spain and stop traffic from the Town; 'Clearance' to take-off had been given as normal.

Eventually the engines were run-up to Full-power and running smoothly, and I could tell the aircraft was airborne before it passed our billet. Good, I thought, they are on their way.

Hearsay later. The Liberator was climbing steeply and was up to 20 foot as it passed the Tower. Then about 2-minutes later, all four engines stopped at some instance.

The Pilot had flown at full-power into a flat calm sea. The worst possible accident to expect survivors.

Knowing what had happened, I got out of my top bunk-bed, put on my plimsolls and in my pyjamas I ran a short distance to stand on the wall. I was one of the first few there, a few more Servicemen

joined me; we stood in stunned silence.

The aircraft was about a half-mile out and could be clearly seen. The fuselage and tail-unit were well above water level. I thought the aircraft had landed on a sandbar.

After a short period of quietness, raised voices and cries could be heard from the aircraft, but they went unanswered as we could do nothing.

As the aircraft sank slowly, the cries died away. It took about 15-minutes to settle, just the top of the fuselage and its tail-unit were visible.

While standing someone on my left called for help. He was near the Ablution Block and beckoned for us to go and help him. A few of us went in response to try and turn over an up-turned dinghy on the beach. With a Heave-O we lifted one side to find the owner had removed the oars.

About 11.30pm (local time) a high-speed launch arrived. It had come from the Naval-yard in Gibraltar Bay and had to come around the Rock (guess 5 miles). It stayed there at the aircraft but did not appear to do anything. I had to get up early in the morning so by this time I left.

Next day it was reported that only one person was rescued and the rest were drowned.

Several weeks later I heard a report that the pilot was severely injured and had no memory of what happened.

### JULY 5<sup>th</sup>

I spoke to the chap who on Duty-Crew to the Liberator. I remarked to him 'You know what happened last night?' with reference to the accident. He did not answer but gave an affirmative nod of the head. Then I asked 'What happened after I left?'. The answer was: 'That the civilians arrived on time along with the lorry of suitcases and purchases. The Aircrew arrived much later.'

### OWN CONCLUSIONS

#### Long stay at the end of the Runway

Summarize that: The Pilot was unhappy about the freedom of movement of the Elevator.

He had asked the Co-Pilot to investigate in the cargo bay (which would be by feel) in the darkness. The walkway would be clear. The first part would be OK as that had been loaded and secured in Africa.

It would be the lorry load of goods purchased in Gibraltar Town, there would also be overnight bags etc. The Co-Pilot would have a difficult, if nearly impossible job to trace clearance of the Elevator control behind the heavy boxes.

That the Cairo cargo was left on the plane overnight. Passengers arrived separate from a lorry-load of goods purchased in town. After a long wait for the aircrew, someone decided to transfer goods



purchased from the lorry into the top cargo bay, which was open. I saw part of it; unauthorised people on the lorry and in the dark aircraft, pass goods and crates into the bay then taken forward. I was concerned the cargo would not be distributed about the centre of gravity. Also whether each item was secured properly to the formers and not laid in between them, or had been fastened to the two control rods I saw the day before which had large universal couplings which were midway between the two formers. There would be others to allow for fuselage curvature. I did not see any wire cables used for the rudder and elevator trimmers.

The jamming of the elevators to lift the tail-unit made the aircraft do a downward loop into the sea. This was possible during the right hand turn (starboard wing down a bit) for some piece of the unsupervised load to slip in between the widened gap between a former and a knuckle joint. When the aircraft hit the sea-bed, passengers and loose cargo would be thrown forward including the obstruction, and would not have any evidence as to what happened.

Charles William Thomas Walker (Bill Walker). Hull. June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014.

Footnote Transcribed to document file from father's handwritten transcript by son David Walker.

Father's hand drawn figures scanned and attached.

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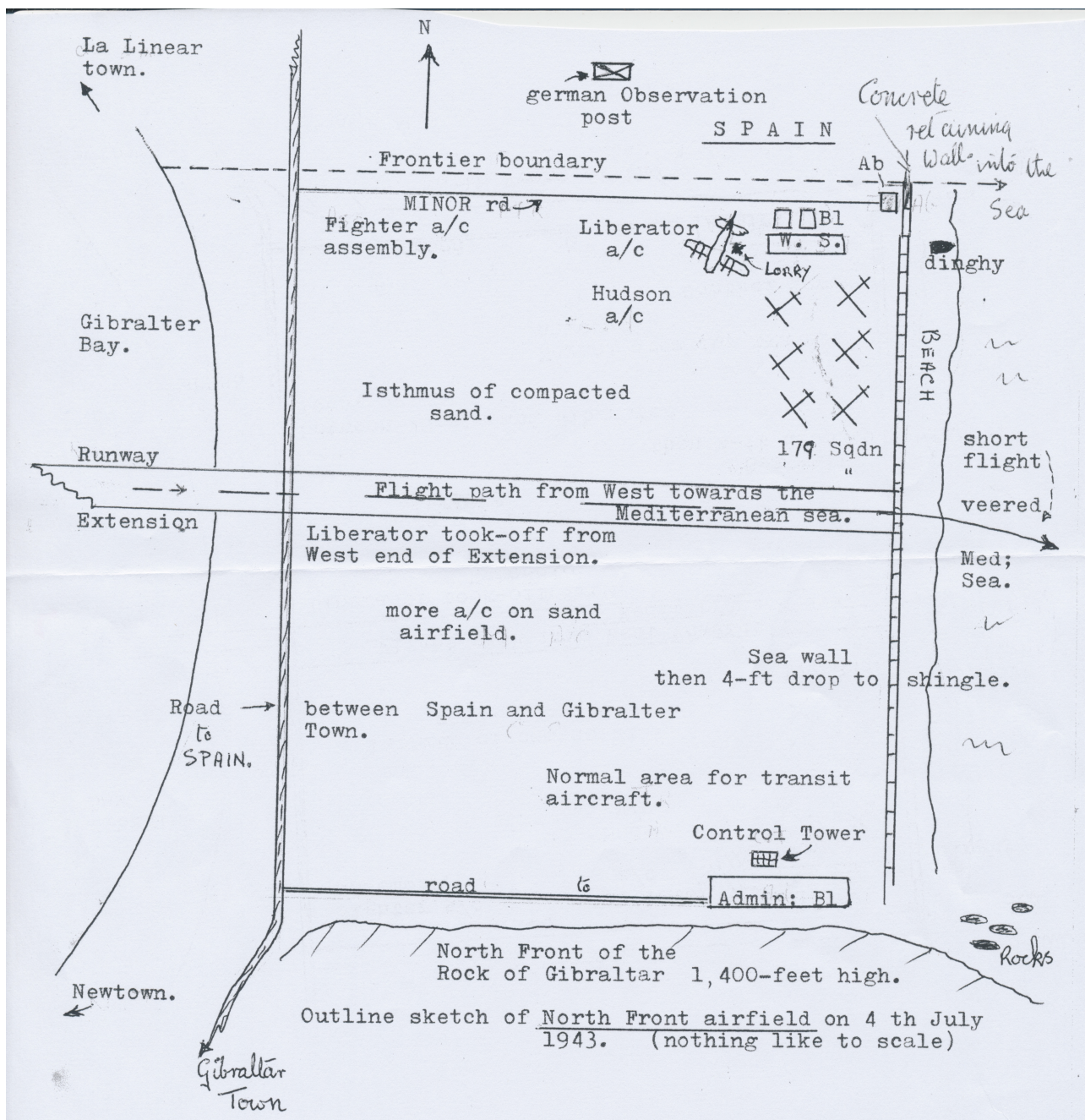


Figure 1. Gibraltar North Front Airfield July 1943.  
My billet labelled BL (just right of parked Liberator).

Next Hole above had the  
RUDDER control Rod.

Fig 2.

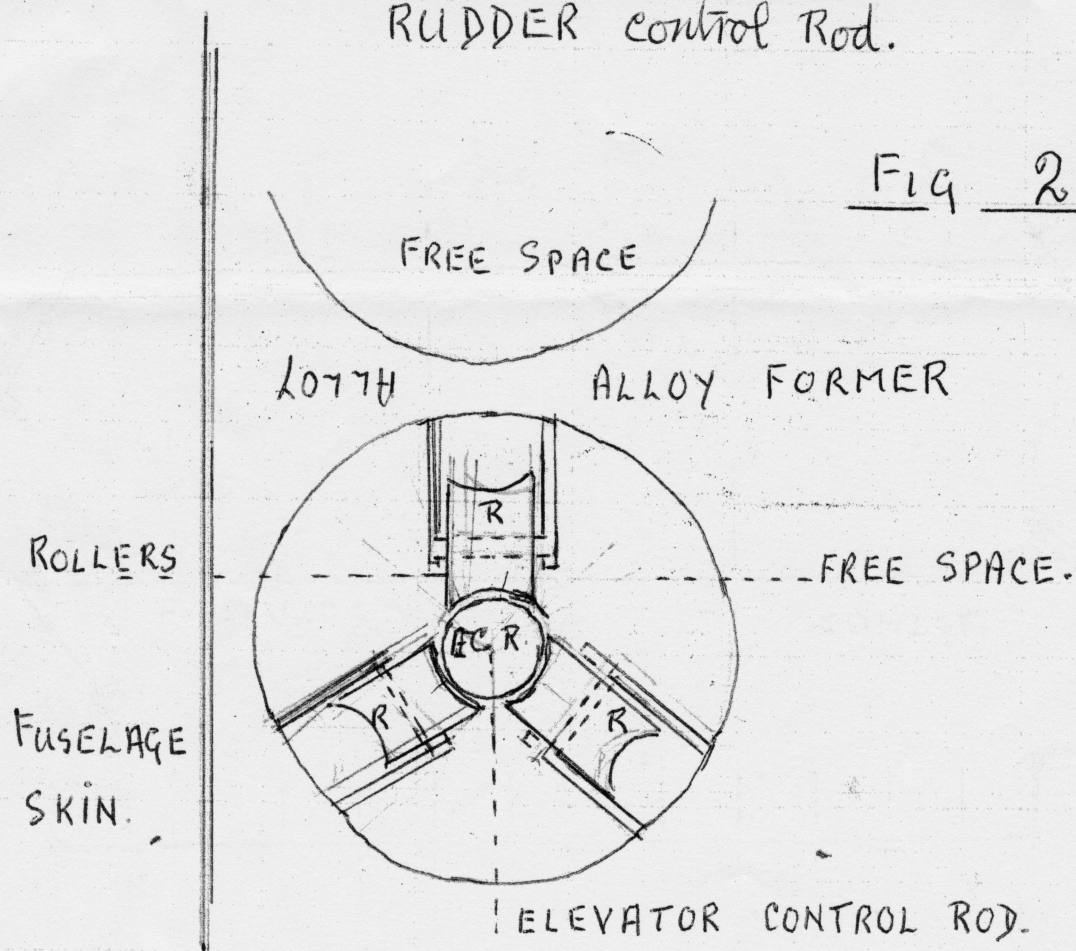


Figure 2. Detail recalled of Liberator control rods seen.

Appendix. Comments by CWT Walker on reading a copy of the Air Accident Report AIR 2/9234, Court of Inquiry held July 7<sup>th</sup> 1943 (now in the National Archives, Kew).

*(The complete AIR 2/9234 report transcript is in 'Sikorski', edited by Keith Sword, Orbis Books London Ltd, 1990. Page numbers in father's comments below, refer to this book.)*

[Transcribed from father's letter by son David Walker. Text in square brackets clarification by David Walker of what is being referred to, but comments need to be read in conjunction with a copy of the AIR 2/9234 Report.]

So having read the published Enquiry [Report] my conclusions are as follows.

The most knowledgeable service-men are missing [as witnesses at the Enquiry], i.e. the Army driver and possibly a mate of the lorry and [reports of] what was transferred to the aircraft. [Also] The person on guard from 8pm – 10pm local time who could say who and how many Polish men were loading.

Some statements are not true; i.e. during the 18 months I was there only 1 Liberator (Polish) and 1 Mosquito and it nearly finished in the Med. Sea.

Lighting [I asked my father how he could clearly see the Liberator after crashing when other reports stated it was dark. There are differing reports by witnesses on record as to how dark it was.] Dust free and clear and it was dusk when I left [the beach] ca. 11 - 11-30 pm and no searchlights at point of leaving. Ignore MacFarlane : Bolland: Quayle – rubbish [their reports to Enquiry as to how dark it was.]

Dinghy [Clarification of whether the dinghy my father and others upturned on the beach but found no oars for was the official rescue dinghy.] I'm puzzled I do not recall a [rescue] dinghy housing. [I] ran down to the beach and [to] a dinghy. The one shown on my sketch [Fig. 1] was the one seen and that [the rescue attempt] occurred over a short period.

Comment. To the right of the airfield there were about 50 yards of large boulders then a sandy beach with a promenade and buildings under a vast concrete reservoir. The beach was reserved for Officers and dignitaries. There is a more likely place for a housed rescue boat. Nearly a straight line to the sunken aircraft; but I did not see it.

Sketch [in David Irving's book 'Accident, William Kimber, pub. 1967, p. 109 of 'Liberator Elevator Control System'] showing two tubes each with twin cables, unlikely to be Rudder / Elevator control cables, they would be thick and abrasive to aluminium tube and to each other. Most likely to trimmers which hardly move: Pilot has a small hand wheel.

Pilot's account of what happened fits my account.

3<sup>rd</sup> Witness [Capt. Jack Williams who describes guarding of plane] Not true.

9<sup>th</sup> Witness [L.A.C. Frank Miles who describes supervised and orderly arrangement and stowage of new baggage] Not true. I saw aircraft being loaded 2100 h approximately.

Aircraft lighting Accept his statement when engines are running. Also there was no 24 Volt trolley acc[umulator] to power lighting.

16<sup>th</sup> Witness [Air Commodore Sturley Simpson] There was no wind. Shooting range, never saw or heard of one being used.

28<sup>th</sup> Witness [Wing Commander Arthur Stevens] Aircraft in three parts, only a fuselage shell, no cargo. Most vital parts of elevator not mentioned.

2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph. Confirms my statement, you cannot poke locking pins into cables. You can into a 1 inch diameter tube, probably strengthened in that region.

Page 199 Q.5 (Answer 7) [20<sup>th</sup> Witness Flight Lieutenant Postgate] Additional cargo was not tied to control tube. Boxes could rest against ovoid stiffeners.

Page 200 – 201 Q.18 [Postgate's Q&A session continued] Answer[ed] aircraft elevator locked when he tried to level upward flight by pushing joy-stick beyond neutral to a forward position; that's when something moved and a cargo box dropped in between a stiffener and a knuckle-joint. Jammed to cause 15 – 20 degree loop downwards and would be getting steeper if the aircraft had been higher up.

Page 204 [Witness Flight Lieutenant John Buck] Suggests rod movement was changed to a ratchet when the movement was changed to chains and cables for rudder and elevator.

Page 206 [30<sup>th</sup> Witness Squadron Leader Ronald Falk] Suggests the total load (fuel:passenger:A/C:cargo) was under maximum tolerated. This endorsed by the early take-off, i.e. used a limited length from stationary to take-off airspeed, followed by a steep climb for a petrol power aircraft.

Page 207 [31<sup>st</sup> Witness Flight Lieutenant Wallace Watson] Suggested to me 6 seats in the cargo hold was for aircrew and possibly ground crew.

Non-standard in bomb bay, i.e. no anchorage for mattress.

Page 208 [Inquiry conclusions by the board] No sabotage. A pure accident brought on by passengers and crew [loading baggage] and lack of supervision.

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