

Merrill, Harry F.

Age: 23

Nationality: Welsh

Rank: Flying/Officer

Unit: No. 32 OTU

Occupation: Pilot

Service No: 129346 (RAFVR)

Birth: 1921
Wales



Home Town: Bethesda, Caernavonshire,
Wales

Death: 19 May 1944
Crash of Beechcraft Expeditor HB129,
Vanished during night Exercises

Burial: Commemorated on Ottawa Memorial.

Others: P/O Edward Machell, Navigator, RAFVR;
Sgt. Alexander Fraser, WAG, RAAF.

Biography

Harry Merrill was born in Britain, probably in Wales, during 1920/21, to Thomas, a watch repairer, and Dorothy Merrill. At the time of Harry's death in May 1944, Thomas and Dorothy were living in Bethesda, Caernavonshire, Wales. Harry was just 23 when he died.

Harry was a member of the RAFVR who trained in Canada as a pilot. He was a Flying Officer, an above average pilot and qualified as a flying instructor.

On 19 May 1944, in No. 32 OTU, Patricia Bay, BC, Harry took part in a night navigation exercise, mostly over Vancouver Island. No communication was made with his aircraft after 11:00 pm. Later searches could find no trace of either the aircraft or any of the crew and it is surmised they disappeared between Tofino and Port Hardy, although with the weather conditions, they could have been off course and even over the mainland. Harry has no grave, no known resting place, and no definitive cause of death. He is commemorated on the Commonwealth Air Force Memorial, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.



Details of Crash

Flying in the mountainous coastal areas around Patricia Bay station was always hazardous and in 1944, weather forecasts did not have the accuracy expected today. The weather encountered on 19 May 1944, compared with that forecast, was thought to be a large factor in the cause of the crash of Beechcraft Expeditor HB129. The civilian meteorologist made the following recommendation:

“... it is strongly recommended that regular ‘Met’ flights as far to sea as possible with a climb to 10,00 to 15,000 feet at the Western extremity be commenced by the air force. Such flights would give the duty forecaster a much better picture of the trend of the weather and would greatly add to the accuracy of placing fronts and forecasting precipitation areas.”

Such flights to be of real value would have to be carried out regularly. Aircraft would have to be equipped with meteorological instruments and at least one member of the crew should have a thorough knowledge of cloud types and general weather phenomena.”

On 19 May 1944, Beechcraft Expeditor HB129 carried a crew of three:

| | | |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------|
| F/O Harry Merrill | Pilot | RAFVR |
| P/O Edward Machell | Navigator | RAFVR |
| Sgt. Alexander Fraser | WAG. | RAAF |

All crew were very competent in their trade and the aircraft was in good order.

The flight that day was a four hour night navigation exercise over a route Base to Tofino, climbing to 10,000 ft, and remaining at this height flying to Cape Cook, to Port Hardy, to Comox, to Base. The original route had included flying out to sea, but this was changed due to the weather forecast. As in most exercises, the crews were instructed to avoid flying in cloud and to return to base if icing conditions were encountered or if W/T contact with base was lost for more than an hour.

The weather forecast was for a front lying off the west coast of Vancouver Island between the Queen Charlotte Islands and Port Hardy. It was moving in from over the ocean and expected to be over northern Vancouver Island by 5:00 am the following morning.

HB129, one of 13 Expeditors on the exercise, took off at 7:51 pm, and normal contact was maintained with base until 10:59 pm when the aircraft requested a

bearing that was supplied and acknowledged. At 11:59 pm, an hour after contact, the aircraft was reported overdue and normal overdue action taken. The other aircraft returned safely between 10:15 and 11:30 pm.

The weather encountered on the exercise was not as forecast. The predicted front had reached the northern part of Vancouver Island by the time the aircraft had passed Tofino.

One pilot described it as:

“On the outward leg at Tofino we encountered broken cloud below us and a layer of stratus cloud from time to time, the base of which was 10,500 feet. We pinpointed our position at Tofino and set course for Cape Cook. Shortly after leaving Tofino, we encountered two layers of 10/10 cloud. The top layer appeared to be based at 12,500 feet and the lower layer was topped about 8,500 feet. As we proceeded on course it was necessary to climb gradually in order to top the lower layer. After about 30 minutes flying between the two layers we were at a height of 11,500 feet and the two layers converged. At this point (the WAG) reported very severe static and stated that he would lose touch with base in a minute. In view of these conditions, I abandoned the exercise and my navigator supplied a D.R. Course for Comox. Weather conditions remained much the same as this for some forty minutes. Comox was reached some four minutes before D.R. ETA indicating that there had been a very considerable wind change. From Comox we set course for base and some four minutes later broke cloud at 10,000 feet with Nanaimo lying ahead of us. We returned to base without further incident at 2245 hours 19th May”

The conclusion of the Investigation into the accident was that HB129 flew into bad weather and was unable to get out of it.

The Officer in charge of night flying that day expressed the opinion:

“Fling Officer Merrill was a capable pilot of slightly above average ability and a qualified flying instructor. His range procedure was good and he was competent to carry out a range let down. Beechcraft at this Unit are not equipped for propeller de-icing. If Flying Officer Merrill flew into cloud contrary to orders given at the briefing, he would undoubtedly pick up ice since the freezing level was about 3,500 feet, and if he did pick up ice the aircraft would have become unmanageable, and with the mountains as high as they are on this island he would not have stood much of a chance.”

The recommendation was to take heed of the meteorologist's comments shown above and institute meteorological flights. This was certainly discussed and

investigated. The investigator also recommended a weather ship offshore to monitor conditions.

From May 20th to 26th, searches were made by from five to 25 aircraft flying a total of 435 hours. No trace of HB129 or its crew was found. There was a large oil slick at about 49° W 122° N, not within shipping lanes, which might have indicated where the aircraft entered the sea.



