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# HATFIELD AIRMEN LEAP FOR LIFE

## Experimental Plane Crashes at Wheathampstead

### TEST PILOTS ESCAPE - AND GO UP AGAIN

(from Herts Advertiser & St Albans Times Friday 14th April 1939)

TWO AIRMEN, ONE OF WHOM WAS **MR. GEOFFREY DE HAVILLAND**, CHIEF TEST PILOT OF THE DE HAVILLAND AIRCRAFT COMPANY, OF HATFIELD, HAD A FORTUNATE ESCAPE WHEN THEY HAD TO LEAP BY PARACHUTE FROM A 'PLANE IN WHICH THEY WERE CARRYING OUT SPECIAL TESTS OVER WHEATHAMPSTEAD, ON TUESDAY MORNING.

The 'plane crashed into a field at **Gustard Wood** and burst into flames. **Mr. de Havilland** was pilot of the machine and his passenger was **Mr. John Cunningham**, who is also a De Havilland test pilot.

*There were two photographs in the report. The first had a sub-title "Wreckage of the 'plane strewn about the field and (inset) Mr. De Havilland (left) chatting with Mr. Norbury after the crash. The second photograph showed about 6 people near the engine of the wrecked 'plane.*

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### Three Thousand Feet Up.

The machine in which they were flying - a small open two-seater mono-plane – was seen circling over Gustard Wood about **3,000 feet up** when **Mr. Cunningham** jumped out and sailed to earth with the aid of a parachute.

The machine continued to circle round, and then **Mr. De Havilland**, who had presumably tried to regain control of it, followed his colleague, and landed by parachute in a field about half-a-mile away from **Mr. Cunningham**.

It is understood that the pilots had begun spinning tests at a great height and the spin had not been arrested when the plane had descended to about 3,000 feet.

When **Mr. de Havilland** found he could not pull the machine out of the spin, he told his colleague to jump, and he followed suit.

.. The machine with its engine full out continued to descend rapidly and after hitting a tree, it crashed through an iron fence and burst into flames. There was an explosion as it struck the ground and debris was scattered over a wide area. The engine was thrown some distance from the main wreckage.

The machine crashed within two hundred yards of the house of **Mr. C. G. Norbury**, of **Delaport, Gustard Wood**.

The sound of the crash brought a number of farm workers and others to the scene and one of the first to arrive was **Mr Fred Kelvey**, of Wheathampstead, who is employed by **Mr Cory Wright** and who was working close by at the time.

### "A Miracle."

He said to a "Herts. Advertiser" reporter "I saw one of the pilots jump out and then the machine continued to circle round as if it was still being piloted. The machine seemed to me to be circling round the pilot as

he descended with his parachute, and it was a miracle that it did not hit him. I thought at first, it was some airmen stunting."

"The machine made straight for the ground and it flew so low over me that I dropped flat on my face, thinking it was going to crash near me."

**Mr Kelvey** was attending to some horses in a field at the time, and the noise of the low flying machine frightened the animals, which bolted across the field.

Both **Mr. De Havilland** and **Mr. Cunningham** landed unhurt and they walked coolly back to the spot where their machine had crashed, only to find smouldering wreckage.

Wheathampstead **Fire Brigade** was called, but their services were not required.

#### **Up Again.**

After telephoning to Hatfield, **Mr. de Havilland** and **Mr. Cunningham** returned to the De Havilland Aerodrome, where they had started their flight, and after lunch they were up in the air again doing more testing work and feeling none the worse for their experience.

It is understood that, at the time, **Mr. de Havilland** and **Mr. Cunningham** were carrying out research work on an experimental machine of the **Moth Minor** type, specially modified to meet the requirements of the research in hand. It is not unusual to work out in small scale, some of the details of big military and commercial aircraft. The nature of the experiments in progress on Tuesday have not been disclosed.

**Mr. de Havilland, 29-year-old** son of the founder of the De Havilland Company, has been chief test pilot since **1937**, when he succeeded the late **Mr. R. J. Wright**, who was killed in a flying accident at Hatfield Aerodrome. He is the eldest of three sons, all of whom are on the staff of the Company, which he joined in **1928** as a technical assistant. He has flown all types of De Havilland aircraft produced since **1928**,

**Mr. Cunningham**, who is **21 years of age**, spent two-and-a-half years as a student in the De Havilland Technical School and has been a test pilot for about a year. He is an officer in the **Auxiliary Air Force**.

*Contributed by Jack Hyde.*

*added September 2008*