

## A Toft wartime collision

Older long-time residents of Toft can recall that, during World War II, there was an aviation accident on the edge of the village and that a military plane crashed into a field adjacent to the Hardwick road. With the help of a specialist website devoted to preserving the archives of US Airforce wartime incidents, it has been possible to piece together the events in some detail. We are especially grateful to Thomas Hughes jr., son of wartime pilot Captain Thomas Hughes, for initially bringing the facts of the incident to our attention, and to Craig Fuller of the Aviation Archaeological Investigation & Research (AAIR) website for being so helpful in tracking down and supplying the original accident reports.

### The event

On June 5, 1944, the day before the D-Day landings, four American type P47D “Thunderbolt” fighter aircraft (fig.1) took off from Duxford Air Base on a routine training flight. Flying one of the planes was Captain Thomas Hughes; another was piloted by Lieutenant Jack Miller. Both men belonged to 83<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadron, 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group.



**Figure 1: P47D Thunderbolt fighter** (copyright [www.military-aircraft.org.uk](http://www.military-aircraft.org.uk))

In his account of the accident as recorded by the official investigation, Captain Hughes takes up the story as the planes flew over Toft. The time was 5.40pm. The sky was overcast, which meant the planes remained low (around 4-5,000 feet) and the pilots were not flying on instruments. Visibility was 8-10 miles:

“The flight had broken formation and were rat-racing and the leader had done a slow roll. The number 2 man was below me when last seen. Just as I had completed my roll, a plane came from somewhere above and his tail hit the nose of my aircraft. The last I saw of him he was heading straight down without a tail. My airplane began to

shake violently and I headed it for the nearest airdrome I saw and put the wheels down. I attempted to land at this airdrome but crash-landed instead. ... When the plane crashed it caught on fire.” [spellings are American English]

Captain Hughes crash-landed on grass next to the runway at Bourn aerodrome. He was taken to hospital and survived. His plane was a complete write-off.

Lt. Jack Miller’s account goes thus (note that planes are referred to as ‘ships’):

“The lead ship executed a slow roll to the left coming out in a slight dive and I did the same. I had completed my roll and was headed down in trail of leader when my plane received a terrific shock and began lurching and gyrating through the air. The controls were useless so I opened the canopy and bailed out as quickly as possible.”

Jack Miller parachuted safely to the ground.

The leader of the four-plane formation, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Thomas Shepard, records what he saw:

“As I saw No.4 complete his roll, I saw one of the other ships spinning tailless. I watched the pilot bail out. While watching the spinning ship, I noticed another ship heading west and then while circling the man in the chute I saw this ship had crash-landed at an airdrome nearby.”

### **The site**

Jack Miller’s plane crash-landed in a field on the Hardwick road going from Toft to Hardwick, in the field known as ‘eight acre’, just before the road bends to the right. Figures 2 and 3 show Jack Miller’s crashed plane lying in the field. Figure 3 shows what could be Hardwick Wood in the background, though it is difficult to tell precisely. Figure 4 shows Captain Hughes’ crashed plane at Bourn aerodrome. The photographs are reproduced by kind permission of AAIR.



**Figure 2: Lt. Jack Miller’s crashed plane adjacent to the Hardwick Road**



**Figure 3: Tail of Lt. Jack Miller's crashed plane adjacent to the Hardwick Road**



**Figure 4: Capt. Hughes' plane after crash-landing at Bourn aerodrome**

### **The verdict**

The official investigation concluded that the accident was 100% the fault of Captain Hughes. The verdict was that "the No.3 man, Capt. Hughes, did not keep the No.2 man, Lt. Miller, in sight during the execution of his roll and caught up with the No.2 man and cut his tail off with his propeller." Disciplinary action followed.