

Rowland White

VULCAN 607

**The Epic Story of the Most Remarkable
British Air Attack since WWII**



**'I more than enjoyed it, it could have been written specially for me'
Jeremy Clarkson**

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8 January 1971

Looming cloud ahead meant that any further low-level flying would have to be abandoned. Flight Lieutenant Bob Alcock told the rest of his five-man Vulcan crew they were scrubbing it and smoothly increased the power to 85 per cent. He raised the nose and the big delta began its climb above the weather.

A moment later, a massive explosion rocked the bomber. Metal fatigue had caused the failure of a turbine blade in the number 1 engine. The blade jammed in the spinning engine until the catastrophic vibration ruptured the engine casing. Unharnessed, the whole turbine broke up. Debris ripped through the wing like gunfire. As the bomber absorbed the impact it lurched violently to the left. A catalogue of devastation unfolded in an instant.

Flight Lieutenant Jim Vinales flinched at the force of the blast, his whole body jerking with the shock of it. His first, instinctive, thought was that they must have hit the ground. But that couldn't be right – they were all still alive.

From the Captain's seat, Alcock and his co-pilot, Flying Officer Peter Hoskins, watched the rpm on the number 1 engine unwind as the jet pipe temperature rose rapidly. Then the fire-warning light in the centre of the control panel blinked on. Red. He shut it down and pressed the 'Fire' button. In the back of the crew cabin, Air Electronics Officer Jim Power switched off and isolated the engine's alternator and scanned

the back of the jet for damage using his rear-view periscope. The big bomber continued to climb on the three remaining engines. When the fire-warning light went out it appeared the problem had been contained. Relaxing a little, Jim Vinales and Flying Officer Rodger Barker, the Navigator Radar to his left, exchanged a glance that acknowledged the unfamiliarity of it all. *What's going on?*, their faces asked, while at the same time confirming that they were in it together. There was no panic. They'd lost an engine, but the Vulcan was blessed with surplus power. They could maintain the climb to altitude on three engines. What they didn't know was that the destruction caused by the shattered number 1 engine hadn't yet properly revealed itself.

It didn't take long. Alcock noticed the jet pipe temperature on the number 2 engine rising alarmingly, followed quickly by its own fire-warning light. 'Fire in the number 2 engine,' he shouted to the crew. It was time to 'drop the rat' – the Ram Air Turbine that would help provide electrical power once the second engine and its alternator shut down. He reached forward and pulled the yellow and black handle.

With that, angry swarms of warning lights lit up around the cockpit and Vinales' navigation gear froze solid as all non-essential electrics shut down. They could do without it. When it boiled down to it, what mattered most was keeping the flow to the powered flight controls. Without *them*, the bomber was out of control. And for the time being at least, while he needed bootfuls of right rudder to keep her straight, Alcock did still have control.

Then the number 2 engine fire-warning light went out too. It was a brief respite, but barely more than an opportunity to declare an emergency. As they flew south over Northumberland towards Newcastle, Vinales passed a plot of their position to the Captain. Alcock thumbed the transmit button on the control column. 'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday,' he began.

With the fire-warning lights out, they weren't out of the woods, but they did have some breathing space. Vinales and

Barker looked at each other again, relieved that the situation, while serious, was no longer quite so acute. Then, to his right, Vinales noticed something catch Power's eye. While the AEO had been working through the detailed checks laid out on his flight reference cards, he'd caught a flicker in his rear-view periscope.

'Fire's not out!' he shouted through the intercom. 'Fire's not out!' As he watched the flames lick and burn underneath the jet's big delta wing, the number 2 fire-warning light came on again.

They were going to have to bail out.

Air Traffic Control responded to the 'Mayday', suggesting they try to put the burning bomber down at Ouston, a small airfield west of Newcastle. No good, Alcock told them. He was going to try to make it south to the Master Diversion Airfield, RAF Leeming, near Thirsk. Only a frontline station had the kind of emergency facilities that might be able to cope with their arrival.

It was becoming clear, though, that even that was too far. As the jet climbed to 9,000 feet, it was beginning to handle raggedly. Alcock knew he had to save the lives of those on board. But only he and his co-pilot had ejection seats. Instead, the backseaters had swivelling seats with inflatable 'assister cushions'. Pulling the yellow and black handle didn't fire the men clear of the aircraft, but merely helped them up and forward out of their seats. They were going to have to jump.

'Prepare to abandon aircraft,' Alcock ordered. Vinales, sitting in the middle, was pinioned until the men on either side of him vacated their chairs. Rodger Barker moved first. His chair swivelled to the right to release him and he clambered down to crouch at the front of the crew hatch on the floor of the bomber's cabin. Vinales pulled the cabin depressurization handle.

'Ready,' each of the three backseaters called out in turn.

'Static line,' instructed the Captain. 'Jump! Jump!'

From next to the crew hatch, Barker turned and pulled at the lever that opened the door. At the same time, Vinales hit the

switch at the Nav Plotter's station that operated the door electrically. Failsafe. The parachutes, attached with a static line to the roof of the Vulcan's cabin, would open automatically.

As the two pneumatic rams pushed the door out into the slipstream, a cloud of dust ballooned up into the cockpit. Barker raised his knees up to his chest, clutched his arms around his ankles and vanished from view out of the 3-foot by 6-foot hole in the cockpit floor.

Jim Power was the next to go. Vinales looked at the AEO to his right – he seemed to be struggling with his oxygen mask, unable to free it. Vinales saw the concern in his eyes and quickly moved to help. As he reached out to tear it off, the mask came clear and Power too clambered down over the jump seat to the sill of the open crew hatch. He curled into a tight ball before sliding down the crew door and out towards the Cheviot Hills 9,000 feet below.

With Power gone, Vinales pushed his seat back on its runners. Unlike Power and Barker he didn't trigger the assister cushion. Received wisdom among the Nav Plotters held that it would only wedge you under the chart table and trap your legs. Vinales wasn't going to test the theory. He unstrapped, got up and climbed down towards the front of the door. A well-rehearsed escape drill. Second nature. He tucked up tight and let go, plunging quickly along the smooth metal door into the sky below.

As Vinales dropped out into the slipstream, from the corner of his eye he caught sight of the two pneumatic rams flashing past on either side of him. Then the elemental roar of the two remaining engines, straining on full power to keep the doomed bomber in the air, overwhelmed him. It was horrendous – an over-amped, thunderous howl that kept any immediate thought of safety at bay.

The parachute jerked open two seconds later and forced his chin down on to his chest. The lines were snarled. It might have spooked him, but Vinales was fortunate. An experienced sports parachutist, he knew there was no real cause for concern. He just had to ride it out and let the twisted risers

unwind. But there *was* a downside to his confidence. He knew he'd never have chosen to jump for fun with a 25-knot wind coursing over rock-strewn hills below. He'd be lucky, he thought, to escape with only a broken leg.

As the receding sound of the burning Vulcan shrank to a low rumble, he struggled to catch sight of it. He strained to look over his shoulder as the parachute lines uncoiled, but a last glimpse of the dying jet carrying away the two pilots eluded him.

They've got ejection seats, he thought, they'll live. He was more concerned now with his own predicament, because if the fates were against him when he hit the ground, *he might not.* And, with the way the day had gone so far, it was hard to say whether luck was on his side or not . . .

'Big heavy bombers. Proper old-fashioned heroism. And triumph of ingenuity over limited funding. So far as I'm concerned, it has the lot and to cap it all it reads like fiction when it's actually fact.' **Jeremy Clarkson**

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'Vulcan 607 deserves to become an aviation classic.' **Len Deighton**



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