Spaldwick 1958 Air Collision

Issued research master

An evidence-controlled account of the mid-air collision between RAF Canberra WJ823 and USAF T-33A 56-1604

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Issue date 17 September 2026

Conclusion

The collision can now be dated confidently to shortly after midnight on Friday 13 June 1958, probably about 00:10 to 00:15. Later aircraft and serial records identify the aircraft as RAF Canberra PR7 WJ823 of No. 58 Squadron and USAF T-33A 56-1604; the official Parliamentary answer describes them more generally as an RAF Canberra and a USAF T.33 training aircraft. All four airmen were killed. The official answer says the Canberra was preparing to land at RAF Wyton, the T.33 was operating from RAF Alconbury, a joint RAF–USAF committee of investigation had been convened, and there were no civilian casualties. Contemporary newspaper pages add named eyewitnesses, an emergency call at 00:15 and a defensible description of the wreckage area.

The aircraft identities, date, approximate time, four men and the experience of villagers are sufficiently established for a responsible public account. The cause, collision geometry, weather and exact impact points are not. Those matters must remain expressly unresolved unless the RAF-USAF investigation, operational records or inquest papers are recovered. The newspapers narrow the wreckage geography but do not justify exact map pins.

Evidence rules

Label	Meaning
Verified	Read in an official record, contemporary publication, index, inscription or authoritative aircraft record.
Attributed	A named publication or witness account that has been inspected but is not independently confirmed.
Lead	Visible only in a search-result snippet or catalogue entry; the underlying page has not been read.
Inference	A reasoned conclusion drawn from identified evidence, not a direct statement in the source.
Unresolved	Evidence is absent, incomplete or contradictory.

A repeated detail is not treated as independent confirmation when later websites derive from the same loss list or magazine account. Exact coordinates, causal explanations and biographical details are omitted unless their source can be identified.

Established account

The collision

Shortly after midnight on Friday 13 June 1958, two military jets collided near Spaldwick in what was then Huntingdonshire. Later aircraft records identify the British aircraft as English Electric Canberra PR7 WJ823 of No. 58 Squadron, RAF Wyton, and the American aircraft as Lockheed T-33A 56-1604, associated with the 20th Fighter-Bomber Wing. The Air Ministry's contemporary statement confirms only that an RAF Canberra and a USAF T.33 training aircraft were involved, and that the T.33 was operating from RAF Alconbury.

The Air Ministry's written answer of 18 June states that the Canberra was preparing to land at Wyton after a training flight. It describes the T.33 as operating from Alconbury. A later loss compilation says the Canberra was letting down, the T-33 had just overshot and the collision occurred at about 1,400 feet. Those additional details are plausible but must be attributed to UK Military Aircraft Losses because no inspected official report yet confirms them.

Settling the date

The collision belongs to Friday 13 June, not Thursday 12 June. The Air Ministry's answer, given on Wednesday 18 June, says it happened 'shortly after midnight last Thursday'. Read alone, that phrase is ambiguous at the midnight boundary. A United Press International report published on 14 June says the four men had been killed 'only 10 minutes earlier' than a separate B-45 took off from Alconbury at 00:23, placing the collision at about 00:13. The headstones of Flight Lieutenant Stevens, Captain Evans and Lieutenant Stephenson each record 13 June 1958. Taken together, the evidence resolves the event to the first minutes of Friday 13 June.

UK Military Aircraft Losses files WJ823 under 12 June. That is best understood as night dating for an event described as occurring during the night of 12 to 13 June. It is no longer a live alternative date, although the source discrepancy remains worth recording.

Official response

The Air Ministry told Parliament that the crews of both aircraft were killed, there were no civilian casualties and a joint RAF–USAF committee of investigation had been convened. The committee's findings have not been located. The absence of a recovered report means this master does not assign a cause.

Corrected chronology

Time	Event	Evidence status
Late on Thursday 12 June	The Canberra returns from a training flight; the T.33 is operating from Alconbury. Departure times, weather and detailed sortie purposes remain unknown.	Official outline; exact timings unknown
Shortly before collision	The Canberra prepares to land at Wyton. UKMAL says the T-33 had overshot from Alconbury; Aviation News later reported tower contact about 30 seconds before collision.	Official plus attributed secondary detail
About 00:10–00:15, Friday 13 June	The Canberra and T-33 collide near Spaldwick. Four airmen are killed.	Date verified; minute approximate
Minutes afterwards	Wreckage falls on open farmland. The St Neots Advertiser reports the aircraft nearly a mile apart. Huntingdon Fire Station receives a call at 00:15 and sends two appliances and an ambulance.	Contemporary reports inspected
00:23	Separate accident: an unauthorised airman takes off from Alconbury in a B-45 and crashes soon afterwards. This event must not be merged with the Spaldwick collision.	Contemporary report
13–14 June	RAF and USAF names are released. Press reports describe recovery operations. The Huntingdonshire coroner, Mr P. S. Davies, opens the inquest into the RAF deaths.	Contemporary reports inspected; inquest outcome unresolved
By 18 June	A joint committee of investigation is convened and the Air Ministry answers a question in the Commons.	Verified official statement
June quarter 1958	All four deaths are registered in Huntingdon registration district.	Verified index transcription

The aircraft

Canberra PR7 WJ823

WJ823 was a photographic-reconnaissance Canberra PR7 serving with No. 58 Squadron at RAF Wyton. The official statement says it was preparing to land after a training flight. Later loss records describe it as letting down towards Wyton. Both crew members were killed.

T-33A 56-1604

The American aircraft was a two-seat Lockheed T-33A jet trainer. Secondary serial histories assign 56-1604 to the 20th Fighter-Bomber Wing at RAF Wethersfield. The Air Ministry's contemporary

wording is more limited and more authoritative for the night itself: the aircraft was operating from Alconbury. These are not contradictory statements, but the wing's home station and the immediate operating airfield should not be merged.

The 1990 Aviation News account, as quoted in Grafham Gossip (April 2010, p. 3), describes Captain Evans as a flying instructor from Alconbury and Lieutenant Stephenson as a pupil from the 55th Fighter-Bomber Squadron at Wethersfield. Captain Evans's headstone records an Airways and Air Communications Service squadron, whose number cannot yet be read confidently; that inscription does not in itself contradict the role reported for this flight.

The four men

Airman	Known details	Unresolved
Flying Officer B. W. Crocker RAF	Pilot of WJ823; aged 23; death index gives Brian W.; home in Copnor; educated at Portsmouth Grammar School; RAF short-service commission from 1953; contemporary report links him to flights over the Christmas Island area after atomic tests; survived by a sister, described as his only remaining relative.	Brian or Bryan; full service record; burial place; precise role in the Christmas Island operations.
Flight Lieutenant Walter Henry Stevens RAF	Navigator of WJ823; RAF headstone at Houghton and Wyton gives age 34 and date 13 June 1958; death index gives age 35.	Age discrepancy; service history; family and exact inquest evidence.
Captain David Clendon Evans USAF	Aviation News, as quoted in Grafham Gossip, describes him as the instructor in 56-1604; aged 39; from Texas; buried at Golden Gate National Cemetery, California; headstone records Second World War service and an AACS squadron.	AACS squadron number; service record; contemporary family details.
First Lieutenant Edgar Lloyd Stephenson USAF	Aviation News, as quoted in Grafham Gossip, describes him as the pupil in 56-1604; aged 25; from Arizona; buried in Phoenix. He is not the later Colonel Edgar L. Stephenson Jr.	Full service record; newspaper source for funeral notice; family details.

The men should be named in the public account without converting unresolved contributor-supplied information into fact. Until a certificate or service record settles Crocker's first name, B. W. Crocker remains the safest form. Contemporary Portsmouth coverage adds that his home was at 104 Hayling Avenue, Copnor; he attended Portsmouth Grammar School for ten years and left in 1953 for a short-service RAF commission; he served in the RAF section of the Combined Cadet Force; and he was 'one of the pilots who flew over the area after the atomic tests at Christmas Island had taken place'. It also

reported that he intended eventually to move into charter flying. His sister was described as his only remaining relative; their father had been killed in an early air raid of the Second World War.

Location evidence

No exact impact point is established. The evidence supports open farmland on the outskirts of Spaldwick, roughly five miles south-west of Alconbury, but does not justify map pins. The St Neots Advertiser reported that the aircraft fell in open country ‘nearly a mile apart’. The Peterborough Evening Telegraph said they came down ‘four fields away from each other’: the American wreckage was on the outskirts of Spaldwick, about a quarter of a mile from a garage, while the Canberra was in a field on the opposite side of the road about three-quarters of a mile away.

Reported location	Source weight	Treatment
Five miles south-west of Alconbury	Contemporary UPI report	Use as a general position, not an exact measurement.
One mile east of Spaldwick	UKMAL; wording does not identify which aircraft	Do not assign this position specifically to the Canberra.
American aircraft about a mile from village; Canberra farther away	Spaldwick postmaster J. J. Hyde in contemporary Portsmouth report	Useful for relative distance, not a survey measurement.
Four fields apart; American wreckage about ¼ mile from a garage; Canberra across the road about ¾ mile away	Peterborough Evening Telegraph, 13 June 1958, p. 1	Inspected contemporary account; use as reported geography, not exact field identification.
Open country nearly a mile apart; ‘Shooting Star’ wreckage less than 400 yards from a cottage	St Neots Advertiser, 20 June 1958, p. 6	Inspected contemporary account; cottage not identified.

The named accounts help orient the scene without fixing it precisely. Mrs E. L. Carter of Carter’s Garage, described as some 500 yards from the crashed American aircraft, said she was awakened by a bang like thunder and saw something burning in the meadow opposite. Cynthia Phipps, living in a caravan behind the village stores, said an aircraft seemed to pass directly overhead before crashing about three fields away. The recommended public map should therefore show only an approximate search area, label it explicitly and avoid individual field pins.

What villagers experienced

The public story becomes most distinctive when it moves from technical aircraft records to the experience of Spaldwick residents. The St Neots Advertiser reported that ‘a bang like a clap of thunder’ roused villagers, and that the planes ‘burst into flames on impact, lighting up the sky over Spaldwick before falling into open country nearly a mile apart’. Cynthia Phipps, who lived in a caravan behind the village stores where she worked, recalled hearing an aircraft apparently coming directly over the caravan. She rushed to the door, heard it crash about three fields away and saw flames rise ‘like a terrific bonfire’.

The Peterborough Evening Telegraph recorded that Huntingdon Fire Station ‘received a call at 12.15 a.m.’ and that two fire appliances and an ambulance were sent out. RAF and USAF personnel searched a wide area of farmland. The St Neots Advertiser reported that wreckage from the ‘Shooting

Star' fell less than 400 yards from a cottage. The local reports provide the contemporary basis for the later village memory that the collision lit the sky; named witnesses independently described flames, but not every detail in identical terms.

Errors and conflations

WT477 was a separate loss

Canberra T4 WT477 was not involved at Spaldwick. It was lost in a separate accident near Hemswell and Spital-in-the-Street, Lincolnshire, during the same night, killing all three on board. UK Military Aircraft Losses files WJ823 under 12 June and WT477 under 13 June, with the entries adjacent. Their proximity and the overnight dating issue help explain how later websites attached the Lincolnshire wording to the Spaldwick collision.

A separate Alconbury accident

Within minutes of the Spaldwick collision, an unauthorised airman took off from Alconbury in a withdrawn B-45 and crashed. Early newspaper reporting sometimes merged locations and details from the two events. Wood Walton and the railway blockage belong to that separate accident, not to the Canberra and T-33 wreckage around Spaldwick. A garbled contemporary reference to the Great North Road cannot safely be assigned to the B-45 and should not be used to locate either accident.

Source repetition is not confirmation

Several aviation websites repeat the 1,400-foot altitude, overshoot and one-mile-east wording. Their agreement does not amount to multiple-source confirmation when the wording ultimately derives from the same UK loss compilation. The public article should attribute those details rather than present them as official findings.

Evidence controlled fact register

ID	Proposition	Status	Evidence control
F01	Collision occurred shortly after midnight on 13 June 1958	Verified	Hansard wording read with UPI timing and three headstones
F02	Aircraft was Canberra PR7 WJ823 of No. 58 Squadron	Strong secondary	UKMAL, UK serial records and Aviation News; official answer says RAF Canberra
F03	USAF aircraft was T-33A 56-1604	Strong secondary	Baugher, UKMAL and Aviation News; official answer says T.33 training aircraft
F04	Canberra was preparing to land at Wyton after training	Verified	Air Ministry written answer
F05	T.33 was operating from Alconbury	Verified	Air Ministry written answer
F06	Collision occurred at about 1,400 feet	Attributed	UKMAL; no inspected official report

ID	Proposition	Status	Evidence control
F07	T-33 had overshot from Alconbury	Attributed	UKMAL; official statement is less specific
F08	Four airmen were killed; no civilian casualties	Verified from combined sources	Official answer confirms both crews killed and no civilian casualties; contemporary press and named records establish four men
F09	Joint RAF–USAF committee of investigation convened	Verified	Air Ministry written answer
F10	Cause of collision	Unresolved	Investigation findings not located
F11	Precise wreckage locations	Unresolved but narrowed	Inspected newspapers place wrecks on open farmland, nearly a mile apart and on opposite sides of a road; no coordinates
F12	WT477 was the Spaldwick Canberra	False	Separate Lincolnshire accident
F13	Villagers heard a thunderclap and saw flames lighting the sky	Attributed contemporary evidence	St Neots Advertiser, 20 June 1958, p. 6; named witnesses independently described flames

Publication narrative draft

Shortly after midnight on Friday 13 June 1958, the night sky over Spaldwick was broken by a collision between two military jets. Later aircraft records identify them as an RAF Canberra PR7 from No. 58 Squadron at Wyton and a United States Air Force T-33A operating that night from Alconbury. All four men aboard were killed. The St Neots Advertiser reported that the aircraft ‘burst into flames on impact, lighting up the sky over Spaldwick before falling into open country nearly a mile apart’.

The Canberra, identified in later records as serial WJ823, was preparing to land at Wyton after a training flight. Its crew were Flying Officer B. W. Crocker, the 23-year-old pilot, and Flight Lieutenant Walter Henry Stevens, the navigator. The American trainer is identified in later serial records as 56-1604. It carried Captain David Clendon Evans, from Texas, and First Lieutenant Edgar Lloyd Stephenson, aged 25 and from Arizona. A 1990 Aviation News account, quoted in Grafham Gossip, describes Evans as an instructor and Stephenson as a pupil. Crocker had attended Portsmouth Grammar School, joined the RAF on a short-service commission and, according to contemporary Portsmouth reporting, flown over the Christmas Island area after atomic tests had taken place.

A contemporary American wire report says the four men had been killed ‘only 10 minutes earlier’ than a separate aircraft took off from Alconbury at 00:23. This supports a collision time around 00:10 to 00:15. The official Air Ministry statement, issued in Parliament five days later, said the collision happened ‘shortly after midnight last Thursday’ and confirmed that there were no civilian casualties.

Later aircraft-loss records say the Canberra was descending towards Wyton, the T-33 had overshot at Alconbury and the aircraft met at about 1,400 feet. Those details have not yet been confirmed from the official investigation and should be treated as attributed rather than definitive. The cause of the collision remains unknown from the records so far examined.

Wreckage fell across farmland around Spaldwick. Cynthia Phipps, living behind the village stores, heard an aircraft apparently pass directly overhead before a crash about three fields away and saw flames rise ‘like a terrific bonfire’. Mrs E. L. Carter, at Carter’s Garage, also described seeing fire in a meadow opposite. The St Neots Advertiser put the wrecks nearly a mile apart; the Peterborough Evening Telegraph placed the American wreckage about a quarter of a mile from a garage and the Canberra across the road about three-quarters of a mile away. The evidence narrows the landscape but does not establish exact impact points.

The accident belonged to an intense period of Cold War flying. Spaldwick lies south-west of RAF Alconbury and west of RAF Wyton, within a district shaped by British and American airfields. Military jets were familiar overhead, but the collision brought the risks of military flying directly into the village’s landscape.

The Peterborough Evening Telegraph reported that Huntingdon Fire Station received a call at 00:15 and sent two appliances and an ambulance. RAF, USAF and police teams searched the surrounding farmland. The Air Ministry later said a joint RAF–USAF committee of investigation had been convened, but its conclusions have not been found. The surviving evidence is enough to restore the correct date, aircraft, four men and villagers’ experience to Spaldwick’s history, while leaving the cause and precise crash sites honestly open.

Publication decision

Decision	Treatment
Issued for publication	Independent review completed and factual, attribution and layout corrections incorporated in the issued master.
Do not delay for a cause	Publish that the cause is not established if the investigation report remains unavailable.
Avoid exact map pins	Use an approximate search area only, unless documentary or field evidence resolves the sites.
Use cautious personal details	Retain B. W. Crocker and record age discrepancies until certificates or service records settle them.

Remaining research

Publication safeguards

- Independent final review completed on 17 September 2026; its factual, attribution and presentation corrections are incorporated in this issued master.
- Keep the cause and exact impact points unresolved unless new official evidence is found; do not infer either from press language such as “head-on”.

- Order the four GRO death certificates if practicable, principally to settle Crocker's name, Stevens's age and recorded places and causes of death.
- Confirm publication permissions for any proposed newspaper image; the downloaded clippings are private research copies only.

Later improvements

- Examine No. 58 Squadron ORB AIR 27/3217 and RAF Wyton ORB AIR 28/1449.
- Ask Huntingdonshire Archives about coroner P. S. Davies's inquest records and Hunts Post coverage.
- Request the USAF mishap report and 20th Fighter-Bomber Wing history through appropriate US repositories.
- Locate the full February or March 1990 Aviation News article and record its author, issue and sources.
- Seek portraits and properly licensed photographs; take a new local photograph of Stevens's headstone if appropriate.

Visual programme

Asset	Purpose	Control
Canberra PR7 representative photograph	Explain WJ823's aircraft type and 58 Squadron context	Use WJ815 Commons image with CC BY 3.0 attribution; clearly label as a similar aircraft.
Period USAF T-33A photograph	Show the American trainer	Use a confirmed US Government image; clearly label as representative.
Approximate location map	Relate Spaldwick to Wyton and Alconbury	No exact impact pins; show only qualified search area.
Four-airmen panel	Restore the people to the centre of the story	Use names and verified details; portraits only with permission or clear rights.
Contemporary newspaper extract	Ground the villagers' experience	Quote modestly and do not reproduce page images without licence.

Core source register

Source	Used for	Status
HC Deb 18 June 1958 vol. 589 cc92–93W, ‘U.S.A.F. Aircraft (Alconbury Accidents)’ — https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1958/jun/18/usaf-aircraft-alconbury-accidents	Official wording, flight phases, deaths, investigation and no civilian casualties	Page inspected
The Panama American, 14 June 1958, p. 1 (UPI) — https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00010883/02580/	Approximate time, four fatalities and general position relative to Alconbury	Page image inspected
St Neots Advertiser, 20 June 1958, p. 6	Thunderclap, sky, open country, separation and cottage distance	BNA page image and OCR inspected; reproduction rights separate

Source	Used for	Status
Peterborough Evening Telegraph, 13 June 1958, p. 1	Emergency response, Mrs Carter and relative wreckage geography	BNA clipping inspected; reproduction rights separate
Peterborough Evening Telegraph, 14 June 1958, pp. 6–7	Coroner P. S. Davies and opening of inquest	BNA page/OCR inspected in independent review
Evening News (Portsmouth), 13 June 1958, p. 1	B. W. Crocker biography and family background	BNA page/OCR inspected in independent review
Hampshire Telegraph, 20 June 1958, p. 1	Cynthia Phipps eyewitness account and Spaldwick postmaster's distances	BNA clipping inspected; reproduction rights separate
Liverpool Echo, 13 June 1958, p. 11; same wire in Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail, p. 6, and Nottingham Evening News, p. 1	Fatalities, recovery reporting and contemporary wire account	BNA page/OCR inspected
Headstones of Stevens, Evans and Stephenson — Find a Grave memorials 160644262, 38562409 and 102917080	Date, rank, age or birth details, units and burials	Photographs inspected; image rights separate
FreeBMD death index, Huntingdon 4b 325–327	Names, ages and registration district	Transcriptions inspected; certificates not ordered
UK Military Aircraft Losses 1958 — https://www.ukserials.com/losses-1958.htm	Aircraft identities; altitude, descent, overshoot and location wording	Inspected secondary compilation; additional operational detail attributed explicitly
Grafham Gossip, issue 68, April 2010, p. 3	1990 Aviation News extract and Bob Stewart recollection	PDF inspected; original magazine not located
Joe Baugher USAF serial list, archived 16 January 2021	56-1604, 20th FBW and date	Archived secondary page inspected
Aviation Safety Network records 21131 and 154992 — https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/21131 and https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/154992	Source chain and separation of WJ823 from WT477	Tertiary records inspected
TNA AIR 27/3217 and AIR 28/1449	Potential squadron and station operational evidence	Catalogue descriptions only; records unread
Spaldwick 100 Years timeline	Local memory that the collision lit up the sky	Published local history; original source not identified

Revision status

Version	Status	Next decision
Draft 2	Applied the Chrome research report's date, official-account and source corrections.	Retain for audit trail.
Draft 3	Incorporated full-page newspaper evidence, named eyewitnesses, emergency response, improved location wording and Crocker biography.	Independently reviewed on 17 September 2026.
Draft 4	Applies the independent review and verified clipping corrections; standardises wording, tables and sources.	Ready for issue decision.
Issued master	Final reviewed research master issued on 17 September 2026.	Approved source for the public article; later evidence may be incorporated through a new revision.