

“FLYING CONTROL and the ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS”

By Wing-Commander Thompson

The invaluable work done by the Royal Observer Corps in warning the country of the approach of enemy aircraft has received just recognition from the highest authority.

It is not sufficiently well known, however, that towards the end of 1941, the Royal Observer Corps undertook the difficult task of reporting aircraft in distress in addition to their already exacting duties. In this way the Royal Observer Corps became closely allied with the Flying Control Section of Fighter Command, the department directly responsible for initiating assistance to an aircraft the moment it is reported in trouble by the Royal Observer Corps. The Royal Observer Corps immediately realised that the motto ‘Forewarned is Forearmed’ applies equally to a distressed aircraft as to a hostile and they tackled their new job with the keenness and efficiency which made success certain from the start.

No 17 Group (Watford) of the Royal Observer Corps, which was situated immediately in the path of aircraft returning from Operations over the South and South-East Coasts, was called upon at all hours of the day and night, often in severe winter conditions, to report aircraft in distress. Not once, up to the disbandment of the Corps, did an aircraft fly over the Watford area without being reported if there was even the slightest possibility that it was in trouble. Here are brief details of just one instance of the invaluable help provided by No 17 Group to show how an aircraft in imminent danger was brought to a safe landing through prompt action.

At 18.07 hours on 4 January, on a cold and misty evening, an aircraft, thought to be a Marauder, was reported to be wandering aimlessly in L.81 by the Watford Royal Observer Corps. It was immediately reported to the Flying Control Section at 11 Group, Uxbridge, and searchlight homing was laid on to Hunsdon who were asked to put on all the airfield lights available. The Royal Observer Corps tracked the aircraft carefully, but it continued to steer an extremely erratic course. A faint ‘Darky’ call was heard by Stanstead, an American airfield, from ‘D for Dog’ transmitting a message that the pilot had sighted an airfield burning white flares and was going to land.

Close co-operation between the ROC and the Flying Control Liaison Officer was responsible for the decision that no airfield in the vicinity could be burning white flares and that these flares were in fact the Northaw Dog Training School conducting special experiments. What would have happened if the aircraft had attempted to land there is too terrible to contemplate. All Stations in the area were, therefore, requested to call ‘Darky’ immediately and to order the aircraft to follow the searchlights. Contact was made and the aircraft altered course, followed the searchlights, and eventually landed safely at Hunsdon at 18.44 hours. The pilot of the aircraft, a Marauder belonging to the 9th American Army Air Force, reported that he was returning from operations, was completely lost and had only sufficient petrol for 15 minutes flying when he landed.

As the Officer in charge of Flying Control in Fighter Command I feel it an honour and a privilege, as well as my duty, to record that the success achieved by Flying Control in assisting distressed aircraft could not have been accomplished without the work and loyal co-operation of every member of No 17 Group of the Royal Observer Corps.

Many aircraft were rescued from certain disasters, many gallant lives were saved, which, in itself, is your reward.

(From ‘Observers Tale – The Story of 17 Group Watford ROC’).