

# THE LONG FALL

THE STRANGE STORY OF HOW TWO SISTERS PLUNGED TO THEIR DEATHS FROM A DE HAVILLAND DRAGON AIRLINER, THUS BECOMING ONE OF THE FIRST "SUICIDES BY AIRPLANE"

BY HOWARD CARTER

Even though it was 1935, the sight and sound of an aircraft passing over the British countryside was still not exactly common. Therefore, two gas fitters from Hornchurch that were working on a housing development in the British suburb of Upminster on the cold and blustery day of 21 February looked up when they heard aero engines rumbling overhead.

They spotted a blue and white twin-engine biplane flying at about 2000 feet in a windswept sky punctuated by clouds. Suddenly, the men spotted a "swirling black cloud" separate from the aircraft. One thought it was perhaps a dog that had somehow jumped from the aircraft. "Poor little animal," he said to his fellow worker.

Then, in seconds, the object grew larger and suddenly took on the appearance of two people with arms

intertwined, accelerating and then slamming into a nearby open field with a terrible thud. The men ran across the frozen ground and were horrified to find the broken bodies of two young women. The face of one was unmarked and calm and "I half expected her to breathe" stated one worker while the other just commented, "it was ghastly, just ghastly... especially the sound."

Thus began — and concluded — a very strange story involving two American sisters; Elizabeth DuBois, age 23, and Jane DuBois, 20. The sisters had been described as "inseparable" by family members and friends. They were the daughters of Coert DuBois, the American Consul in Naples, Italy, and both had led pampered lives filled, as they got older, with social events and parties. They were the only children of DuBois and his wife Margret. DuBois

was 54-years-old at the time and a native of Hudson, New York, but his legal residence was San Francisco. He had been the American consul general at Naples since 1931.

Before entering the diplomatic service, he was in California as district forester of the US Forest Service from 1911 to 1917. During the Great War, he was a lieutenant colonel with the 10th Engineers Forest Regiment in France. Joining the diplomatic corps, he would go on to serve in Washington, Paris, Port Said, Batavia, India, and Naples.

Police were soon on the tragic scene — a scene quickly surrounded by curious locals — and began to piece together from the very shaken workmen what would become an extremely odd story that would captivate British and international newspapers for days to come.

The two women had somehow fallen from a de Havilland airliner operated by Hillman's Airways. This was one of many small British airlines formed during the 1930s. Edward Henry Hillman was a bus operator from Essex but after selling his company at a handsome profit, the stocky Hillman decided he wanted to try his hand at creating an airline. Hillman's Airways' first charter flight took place on 25 December 1931 and then scheduled service began on 1 April 1932 using a de Havilland Puss Moth and Fox Moth. These were pioneering British light aircraft that carried a few passengers on Hillman's newly-established air routes. The service was between Romford and Clacton and operated every three hours, becoming extremely popular with customers. As business picked up, Hillman purchased a twin-engine de Havilland Dragon to fly between England and Le Bourget in Paris.

On 1 June 1934, the airline's new main base became Stapleford Aerodrome and business was good. However, on 2 October 1934, de Havilland Dragon Rapide G-ACPM (the first example of the type) crashed into the English Channel off Folkestone, killing the pilot and six passengers. It was reported that the weather conditions over the Channel were "moderately bad" but the French coast was enjoying clear skies. Between the altitudes of 3000 and 8000 feet, the weather was good over the Channel so the pilot was instructed to climb into this clear area and proceed on compass heading to France. However, he decided to ignore this order. Flying in cloud, he made a number of garbled radio transmissions and Hillman's chief pilot, sensing that trouble was brewing, called the duty officer at Croydon Aerodrome and demanded the field give G-ACPM a "position" without further delay since it was obvious the aircraft was off course. The Croydon transmissions began immediately but were not answered by the pilot.

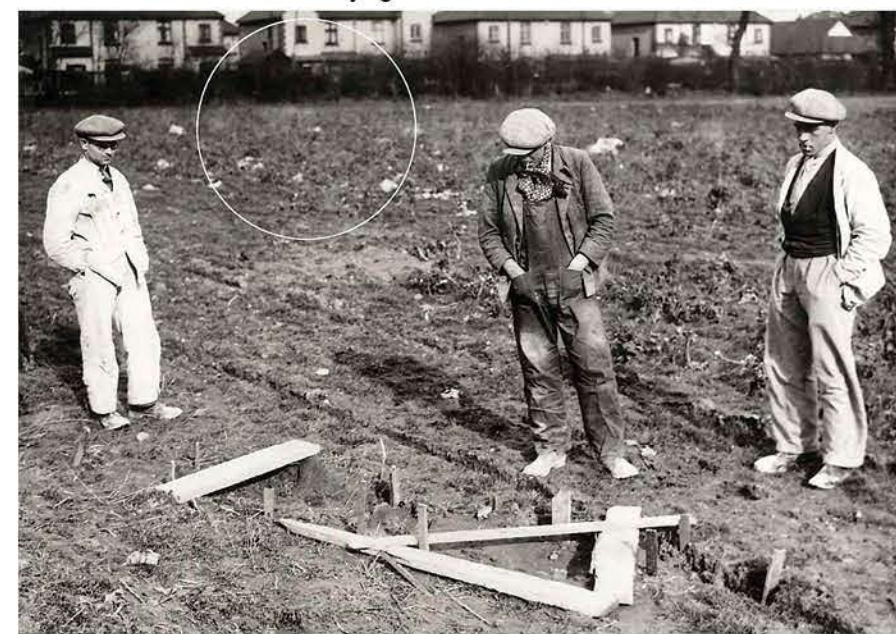
The captain of the German cargo vessel SS *Leander* was proceeding through the Channel and would report that he nor his crew had not heard any sort of aircraft engine noise until there was a sudden roar, as if engines had been opened to full power. Altering



Jane DuBois wrote in her final letter that she was hoping to marry the RAF pilot that perished in the crash of the Singapore flying boat.



Elizabeth DuBois and her sister Jane lived lives of privilege but with no apparent direction.



The gas-fitters and the area in which they were working. The circle shows where the sisters impacted the ground.

course toward the sound of the noise, the men found floating fragments of aircraft wreckage, mutilated bodies, clothing, papers and other items strewn over the ocean surface for about 100 yards. This tragedy made considerable news at the time and was a major setback in promoting airlines as a "safe" way to travel. By the time of this accident, Hillman's Airways had become a public company but Hillman took sick and died on 31 December 1934 at age 45. There was another

accident on 28 January 1935, when de Havilland Dragon Rapide G-ACPO operating a mail flight from Aldergrove Airport in Belfast to Stapleford crashed at Derbyhaven on the Isle of Man in bad weather.

De Havilland Dragon and Dragon Rapides were staples of the early airlines. Built out of wood, some metal, and covered with fabric, the planes were powered by inline Gipsy six engines. The Dragon was essentially a smaller version of the limited production



Hillman's winged logo.

De Havilland DH.84 Dragon G-ACEV of Hillman's Airways was the aircraft from which the sisters jumped to their death. A Rapide is parked directly behind the Dragon.