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KILLED IN A COMET CRASH

John Steel died in a crash of a BOAC De Havilland Comet on 10 January 1954. The aircraft went down into the sea off Elba 20 minutes after taking off from Rome.

Photo Credit: British Airways. Thanks to Marshall Massengale for contributing this picture.

Worlds First Turbojet Passenger Service

BOAC's De Havilland Comet G-ALYP "Yoke Peter" leaves London Airport for Johannesburg on 2 May 1952. This was the plane that crashed on 10 January 1954.

The History of the Comet

The DH. 106 Comet prototype took off from Hatfield on 27 July 1949.
Compared with the propeller-driven airliners of the day, the Comet appeared incredibly sleek and streamlined. The Comet 1 was powered by four 2,018 kg thrust de Havilland Ghost turbojets buried in the wing roots. There was accommodation for 36 passengers in two cabins and pressurization enabled it to fly at levels over 12,000m (40,000 feet).
BOAC took delivery of 10 Comets and the first passenger service opened to Johannesburg on 2 May 1952. Other airlines were intensely interested but, except for Air France, UAT and Canadian Pacific , were content to wait and see what happened. What they discovered was that once passengers experienced the absolutely smooth and almost silent flight through the dark blue sky of the stratosphere and found they could arrive at their destination in about half the time they simply did not want to fly in lurching, noisy piston engined airliners thundering and vibrating through storm clouds for twice as long. Consequently for a while Britain led the world in jet airliner production.
On 2 May 1953 exactly one year to the day after their introduction a Comet broke up in flight near Calcutta. In January 1954 another disintegrated and fell into the sea near Elba. After modifications the Comet was put back into service, but less than three weeks later, on 8 April 1954, a third Comet broke up and the type was withdrawn from service.
It was eventually discovered their fuselages had exploded whilst climbing up to cruising height, weakened by the fatigue of repeated pressurization and depressurization. The aircraft whose wreckage was discovered had begun to crack at the corner of one of the ADF aerial cut-outs, and another tested on the ground burst open at the corner of a window.
It took de Havilland four years before they reappeared as builders of jet aircraft and in the meantime Boeing, Douglas and Lockheed had overtaken them in design and had captured the bulk of the world's markets.
Comet 2s, already under construction were modified and went to the RAF. Work went ahead on the Rolls-Royce Avon powered Comet 4 with longer fuselage, seats for up to 81, and additional, wing mounted, fuel tanks.The redesigned Comet 4, of which BOAC ordered 19, went into service on the 4 October 1958 on the North Atlantic route between London and New York. Subsequently 74 Comet 4s in various configurations were sold but the unnecessary hiatus crippled the program which should have run to 1000 aircraft. The death knell for the Comet on the prestige high density high speed routes was sounded only one month after the Comet 4 had started operations, by the introduction of the superlative Boeing 707 jet airliner.
In all, 20 Comets crashed between 1952 and 1971 taking the lives of almost 500 people.

Newspaper Articles on the Crash of G-ALYP "Yoke Peter" on 10 January 1954

The Times (London) 11 Jan 1954 Comet airliner Crashes in Mediterranean