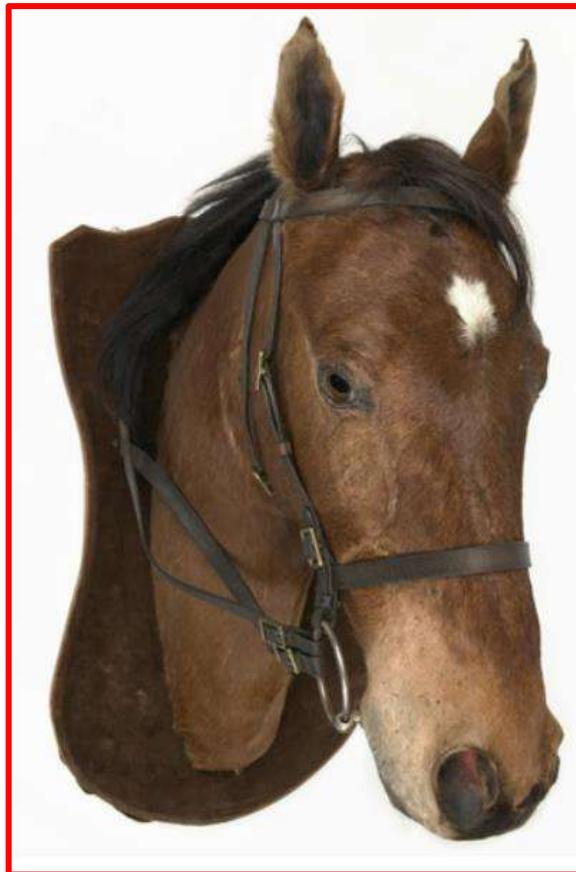


THE TIGER



*Mounted head of
"Sandy the War Horse"*

**THE NEWSLETTER OF
THE LEICESTERSHIRE & RUTLAND BRANCH
OF THE
WESTERN FRONT ASSOCIATION
ISSUE 119 – OCTOBER 2021**

CHAIRMAN'S COLUMN

Welcome again, Ladies and Gentlemen, to *The Tiger*.

It seems only fitting to begin this column with a huge "Thank You" to all who attended the August meeting, our first since February 2020. As always, it was a pleasure to see our regulars once more and to meet a number of newcomers, who hopefully enjoyed the evening and will return for more! An attendance of 30 was most encouraging and surely augers well for our future . . .

Sadly, one man unable to join us in August was Brian Elliott, a regular attendee of our meetings alongside the late John Taylor and Jonathan Smith. Unfortunately, Brian suffered a fatal heart attack three days before we met and we offer our sincere condolences to his family and friends.

On Sunday, 5th September, Valerie & I were guests of the Brookwood Last Post Association and attended their monthly remembrance service at the R.A.F. Memorial, Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, where my fallen ancestor, C.S.M. Don Alphonso Humberston, 1st Battalion, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, was amongst those remembered. Readers may not be aware that, following the fall of Belgium in 1940, the nightly Last Post remembrance ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ypres was banned. However, thanks to the efforts of Edgar Cook, a Great War veteran from Woking, the service was replicated at Brookwood Cemetery from January 1941 and continues to this day. It is hoped that further details of our visit will be available for the next Newsletter, allowing a more detailed account to be produced.

In closing, may I draw your attention to Page 10 regarding the successful nomination of Lieutenant Phillip Bent V.C. D.S.O. for a Green Plaque Award. Bent was the second member of the Leicestershire Regiment to be honoured in this way during the Great War and I hope you will join me in supporting his case by voting before the given deadline.

I look forward to seeing you all at our forthcoming meeting.

D.S.H.

OUR FORTHCOMING MEETING

27th September 2021

Guest Speaker:

John Stanyard

Prudential & The Great War

John Stanyard, a retired Corps Sergeant Major in the Salvation Army, makes a welcome return to tell the story of the Prudential Assurance Company and their contribution to the Great War. Over 8,000 of their employees served and nearly 800 failed to return . . .



DATES FOR YOUR GREAT WAR DIARY OCTOBER

1 st	1916	Western Front	Battle of the Transloy Ridges begins (Somme)
1 st	1918	Middle East	Arab forces under T E Lawrence capture Damascus
4 th	1917	Western Front	Battle of Broodseinde begins (Ypres Salient)
5 th	1918	Middle East	French naval forces occupy Beirut
6 th	1915	Eastern Front	German & Austro-Hungary armies invade Serbia
8 ^h	1916	North Atlantic	U-53 sinks several vessels off US coast escalating War at Sea
9 th	1915	Eastern Front	Belgrade occupied by Austro-Hungarian troops
9 th	1917	Western Front	Battle of Poelcapelle (Ypres Salient)
12 th	1915	Western Front	Edith Cavell executed by firing squad at Schaerbeek, Brussels
13 th	1917	Western Front	First Battle of Passchendaele (Ypres Salient)
13 th	1914	Western Front	First Canadian troops land at Plymouth
14 th	1915	Eastern Front	Bulgaria and Serbia declare War on one another
15 th	1915	Eastern Front	Britain declares War on Bulgaria
15 th	1917	Western Front	Mata Hari executed by firing squad at Vincennes, near Paris
16 th	1914	Australasia	NZEF sails from Wellington bound for Egypt
16 th	1915	Eastern Front	France declares War on Bulgaria
17 ^h	1914	Australasia	AIF sets sail for training in Egypt
17 th	1918	Western Front	Battle of the Selle commences
19 th	1915	Eastern Front	Italy and Russia declare War on Bulgaria
23 rd	1914	Middle East	Indian Expeditionary Force "D" lands in Mesopotamia
24 th	1916	Western Front	French counter-attack at Verdun
26 th	1917	Western Front	Second Battle of Passchendaele
26 th	1917	South America	Brazil declares War on Germany
28 th	1916	Western Front	German air ace Oswald Boelcke killed in mid-air collision
30 th	1918	Eastern Front	Turkey agrees an Armistice with Allies

Captain Charles Hamilton Sorley

7th Battalion, Suffolk Regiment

K.I.A. 13th October 1915

Aged 20

Sorley's final poem:

"When you see millions of the mouthless dead"
published posthumously in 1916

*When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
"Yet many a better one has died before."
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.*



BRIGADIER-GENERAL SIR W T BRIDGES

**K.C.B, C.M.G, M.I.D, A.I.F,
AND HIS HORSE, SANDY**

by Lynn Roffee

This narrative is about an Officer and his horse both of whom have a unique place in First World War Australian Military history. The Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.) Officer's body, was the only identified soldier to be returned to Australia for burial. The only war horse to return was his favourite charger named "Sandy".



The Officer was Major General Sir William Throsby Bridges (left) who was born in 1861 in Greenock, Scotland. His father had been a Royal Navy captain and his mother was from Moss Vale, New South Wales (N.S.W.) Australia. He was educated at Ryde on the Isle of Wight and then attended the Royal Naval School in London. Bridge's father took the family to Canada when he retired from the Navy. Young Bridges didn't follow his father in joining the Navy but entered the Royal Military College of Canada at Kingston. When Bridges family migrated to Australia, he became unsettled and this affected his studies. Although he obtained the Certificate of Military Qualifications, Bridges was to become the colleges' first drop out and his father was required to pay \$100 fine to withdraw him from the course. Bridges then joined his parents in Moss Vale N.S.W. where he worked as an Inspector for the Department of Roads.

In 1885, following the fall of Khartoum, the self-governing colony of New South Wales established a military contingent to serve with the British Military. Bridges travelled to Sydney to enlist but the force had been raised by the time he arrived. Australian colonies were also deeply concerned about Russian intentions in Afghanistan and expanded their military forces. As a result, Bridges was given a temporary commission as a Lieutenant in the New South Wales Artillery and later offered a permanent position. He undertook various courses and qualified as a gunnery instructor in 1890 and was promoted to Captain. He undertook further training at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, and then at the Royal School of Gunnery at Shoeburyness. Upon returning to Australia, he was appointed Chief Instructor at the Middle Head School of Gunnery and two years later promoted to Major.

Bridges was one of four N.S.W officer's seconded to serve with the British Army in the Second Boer War and took part in the relief of Kimberley, Paardeberg and Driefontein. He contracted typhoid and was evacuated to England before returning to Australia where he took command of the Brigade Division of Field Artillery followed by a quick succession of appointments. He achieved the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in July 1902 and then Colonel in October 1906.

Bridges became Australia's representative on the Imperial General Staff and in 1909 went to London and in 1910 he was promoted to Brigadier General. It is said his wife Ethel and children accompanied him. They had seven children in total sadly three of whom having died young.

On the recommendation of Lord Kitchener, he was recalled to Australia to become the first commandant of the Royal Military College at Duntroon. Whilst enroute back to Australia he visited

various military academies including Sandhurst, Woolwich and West Point. Kitchener, it seems had recommended Duntroon be modelled on the United States Military Academy at West Point. Bridges did this to a large degree and chose the Old Campbell homestead as the site for Duntroon military college.

In August 1914 Bridges was promoted to Major-General and appointed Inspector-General of the Australian Military Forces. He was given command of the Expeditionary Force of some 20,000 men comprising an infantry division and light-horse brigade which became the first Australian Imperial Force. Bridges is said to have supervised the intensive training of the division when it landed in Egypt in late 1914 until landing at Ari Burnu on the Gallipoli peninsula on the 25th April 1915. According to the Journal of Royal Military College of Australia, Bridges was a “*stern disciplinarian who was capable of enforcing his word. He had an abhorrence of the least show of sentiment, and would rather have gone to any extremity of rudeness than let a trace of it appear in his face, his voice, or his actions. He made men afraid of him, but he disliked them to show their fear...*” (*Official History of Australia in the War 1914-18, Vol 1, pp 66-71*)

Sandy, his favourite mount (right), a bay of 16 hands (163cm), was born in 1907 in the old Murray River village of Tallangatta, Victoria. He was owned by the O'Donnell Brothers, who had a brickmaking company in the village and used Sandy to haul bricks. The O'Donnell's donated Sandy to the Commonwealth Government shortly after the commencement of the war.



Sandy was known to be Bridges preferred charger though he had two other chargers that accompanied him when he embarked aboard the *H.M.A.S. Orvieta* at Melbourne in October 1914. It would seem that Sandy quickly endeared himself with Bridges as their time together was very limited given the events and timescales that faced them both.

According to the Anzac Portal, Australian Government Department of Veteran's Affairs, over 120,000 horses were sent overseas, of which 29,000 served with the A.I.F and other allied troops in Egypt and the Middle East. The remainder were mainly sold to the Indian Army. The A.I.F. preferred a certain type of horse, a Waler, as it was well suited to desert conditions in Egypt and Palestine. The Australian Light Horse Mounted Force of the A.I.F. were a skilled formation of mounted infantry that particularly liked the Waler. It was both a sturdy and hardy horse with an athletic ability, able to travel considerable distances in hot weather with little water. The name Waler comes from the breeding origin of the horse in New South Wales and were originally known as New South Walers. Walers were derived from a variety of breeds including the Arab thoroughbred and Timor pony. Both the extreme climate and the challenging working conditions of Australia had developed the Waler into a hardy horse.

During the campaign Walers often went up to 60 hours without water, whilst carrying a rider, saddle, equipment, food and water. The combined weight was approximately 130 kilograms. The Waler played its part contributing to the Allied victory against the Ottoman Empire in the Sinai and Palestine Campaign. However, in Gallipoli the Light Horse men fought without their horses. When the war ended, the Australian Light horsemen were to learn that their horses wouldn't be returning home with them. The high costs of transportation and serious concerns over introducing

diseases that could affect the nation's livestock effectively signed the death warrant for some. All Light Horses over 12 years were to be killed and the remainder sold local to where the troops were. During the war men had become attached to their horses forming a close bond, having spent considerable time with them and survived skirmishes together. There was not only sadness of their parting but also what might lie ahead for the horse. The thought of ill treatment and starvation and unkind hands resulted in some men deciding to shoot their horses against orders as the poem below reveals:-

“Trooper Bluegum”

*I don't think I could stand the thought of my old fancy hack
Just crawling round old Cairo with 'Gyppo on his back
Perhaps some English tourist out in Palestine may find
My broken-hearted Waler with a wooden plough behind*

No: I think I'd better shoot him and tell a lie:-

*“He floundered in a wombat hole and then lay down to die”
May be I'll get court-martialled; but I'm damned if I'm inclined
To go back to Australia and leave my horse behind*

*by Major Oliver Hogue, 14th Australian Light Horse Regiment,
From Australia in Palestine, 1919*

The A.I.F. landed at “Z” Beach, on the Gallipoli Peninsula, at 4.30am on 25th April 1915. At the time it was called Ari Burnu with the name of Anzac Cove only officially recognised by the Turkish Government in 1985. Bridges is reported to have landed at 7.20am amongst bursting shrapnel and was accompanied by Colonel (later Sir Brudenell) White and Major (later Field Marshall Sir Thomas) Blamey at Anzac Cove.

The A.I.F. had transported 6100 horses to Gallipoli but only a few disembarked there, whilst the others were sent back to Egypt. The terrain was too steep and rough for the horses, with many hills, ravines and gullies. Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood quickly decided that there was both insufficient room and little requirement for horses on the crowded beachhead at Anzac Cove. Within days of landing Birdwood had sort approval to send the horses back to Alexandria initially being sent to Lemnos.

On 4th May 1915 Bridges sustained a serious gunshot wound from sniper's bullet, whilst inspecting positions at Monash Valley. The gunshot severed the femoral artery and vein in his right leg. Sir Ian Hamilton sent a cablegram to the Prime Minister which stated *“Deeply regret announce General Bridges wounded yesterday, I have seen him – he is very cheery – but his wound is certainly serious”*. Hamilton wrote in his diary that *“Bridges has been badly wounded. The news upset me...”*. He went to see Bridges who *“looked languid and pale. But his spirit was as high as ever... were he a young man, they could save him by cutting off his leg high up. Bridges will be a real loss. But was a single-minded, upright, politics-despising soldier. With all her magnificent rank and file, Australia cannot afford to lose Bridges”*.

His last words to one of the staff were spoken very weakly *“anyhow, I have Commanded an Australian division for nine months”*. Bridges died aboard the hospital ship *H.M.T. Gascon* on 18th May at 5.45am before it had set sail for Egypt. Hamilton was to send another message to the Prime Minister *“The whole force mourns his irreparable loss... The news of the distinguished*

officer's death caused deep regret throughout Australia. General Bridges was recognised as a brave leader and brainy organiser and administrator. His work in connection with the Military College at Duntroon will serve as an imperishable monument to his zeal and energy". He was buried with Military Honours at Chatby Military Cemetery, Alexandria on 20th May.

The King conferred a posthumous Knighthood (K.C.B) on the 26th May 1915 in recognition of Bridges distinguished service in the field.

On the 31st May 1915, *The Argus* newspaper, based in Melbourne, published a cable that had been sent by Captain Charles E. W. Bean, who was the official press representative for the Australian Forces, and assigned to Bridges Headquarters staff, based in the Dardanelles. Bean reported "*Bridge's was wounded while on his way to visit the firing line... from the first day when he made daily inspections of the Australian line, he utterly ignored personal danger and would stand up in full view of the enemy's position. Bridges was usually careless of his personal safety almost to the point of recklessness. He often chaffed members of his staff who were more careful. On this particular morning ... as he went along, the men in the dressing stations and others at the bends of the roads warned him "you had better run across here sir" they said. For once the General accepted the advice and ran across. The General stood talking, pulled out a cigarette lit it, and remained smoking for some time and said "Well we must make a run for it". He ran around the corner through the shrub toward the next cover some yards away. Before he reached it, he fell. Help was instantly at hand. A Doctor went forward, stooped down, hurriedly attended to his wound, and then brought the General in to cover. The bullet had cut two large arteries in the thigh. It was only the instantaneous attention of a skilled surgeon ... that prevented immediate death. The General's first words ... "Don't carry me down. I don't want any of your fellows to run into danger".*

Bean later wrote of Bridges "*he treated me throughout as one of his staff except in this, that he gave me no orders & let me free to write & and do what I pleased...I obtained a chance such as no other journalist in this war, or probably any other, has had of going absolutely where he liked, in the line (or indeed in front of the line, if I had wanted) without restrictions so long as I was with our own troops".*



The reburial of Bridges on 3rd September 1915 and the grave as it is today

On 27th July 1915 Bridges body was exhumed and repatriated to Australia. His body lay in state in Melbourne Cathedral which was opened to the public to pay their respects. The coffin was draped in the Union Jack, and on top, lay his helmet, sword and gloves with five men from the Royal Australian Garrison Artillery standing guard. After the service his coffin was put on a gun carriage

followed by a thirteen-gun salute and taken by special train to Queanbevan and then conveyed by gun-carriage to St John's Church, Canberra. A memorial service was held on the 2nd September and he was re-buried the following day in the Memorial at the Mount Pleasant Lookout overlooking the Royal Military College grounds at Duntroon, Canberra. A fitting place for Bridges to lay at rest and a permanent reminder of his achievement at Duntroon. A memorial tablet was also erected in the St John the Baptist Church, Canberra. In 1916 the family home "The Mill" in Moss Vale was converted into a convalescent hospital for returning servicemen.

Bridges was the only "*named*" A.I.F. soldier killed during the First World War to have his remains returned to Australia. The basis of the decision to return Bridges body to Australian soil is not exactly known. Most men were buried where they fell or in newly formed cemeteries or buried at sea. However, it could have been due to a combination of reasons including his rank and military experience, the high esteem in which he was held by the Australian Government, the setting up of the Royal Military College at Duntroon, his distinguished service, being mortally wounded in the field and possibly a symbol of national respect for the Gallipoli campaign which had hardly begun.

Bridges military records contain two letters – one is a copy of a letter, dated 14th February 1921, sent to the Officer in Charge, Base Records, Department of Defence in Melbourne, from the Commonwealth of Australia, London concerning a letter it had received from the Imperial War Graves Commission (I.W.G.C.) in London. The I.W.G.C had said "*It has been reported to this office that the body of the above-mentioned deceased officer (Bridges) was privately exhumed on the 27th July, 1915 and it is desired to ascertain the place of reburial. Have you any information on this subject, and can you state the name and the address of the next of kin. Please?*".

The second letter, being a response to the above stated "*...on the authority of the Australian Government. The remains were brought to Australia and re-interred at Duntroon, Federal Territory*".

Several sources suggest that Sandy went ashore with Bridge's at Gallipoli but official records state that the charger remained in Egypt. Other research stated that from the 1st August 1915, Sandy was cared for by Captain Leslie Charles Whitfield, an Australian Veterinary Corps officer, with the 2nd Division based at Heliopolis, Egypt. According to Whitfield's Military records he had sailed with Bridges aboard the H.M.A.S. Orvieto enroute to Alexandria.

Sandy remained in Egypt until he and Whitfield were transferred to France in March 1916. It has been suggested that he was found another owner but research has not been possible to find who this was. Once source said that Sandy, was attached to the Australian Veterinary Corps Hospital in Calais and was used by vets who rode out to reach wounded animals. One report suggests that his rider died in a gas attack. This seems likely as Sandy was gassed and surgeons had been "powerless" to save his eyes.

In October 1917 Senator George Pearce, Minister for Defence for Australia, ordered that Sandy be returned to Australia for pasture at Duntroon. On the 5th May 1918 Sandy was sent from the Australian Veterinary Hospital at Calais to the Remount Depot Swaythling in England. It's probably no coincidence that Whitfield, who was by then Lieutenant-Colonel and the Commander of the veterinary hospital in Calais, had still been looking after Sandy. Private Archibald Thomas Jordan A.I.F., a groom, who had been in hospital since April 1917 and classed as permanently unfit for active service, accompanied Sandy back to England and then onwards to Australia. According to Jordan's Military records he boarded the freighter *S.S. Booral* at Liverpool on 7th

September 1918 and arrived in Melbourne on 13th November. He attended a Medical Board on the 30th November was discharged on “*Termination of period of Enlistment*” from the A.I.F. on 2nd December 1918.

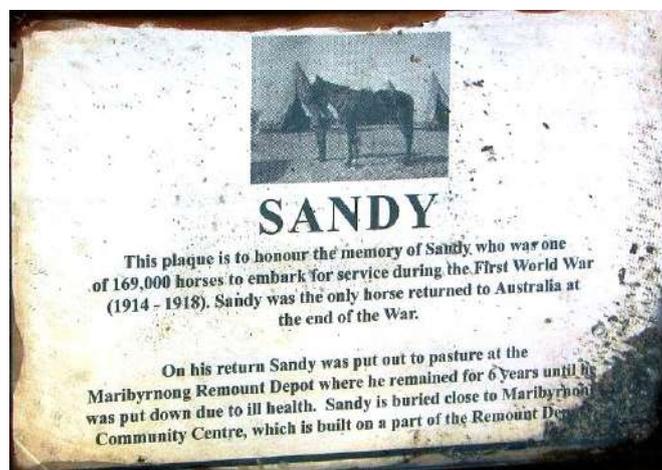
Following Sandy’s arrival in Melbourne and three months of veterinary observation, he was declared free from disease. However, he was partially blind and starting to become frail. According to the Western Perth News, dated 20th December 1918, the men of the First Australian Division considered Sandy “*a well and upstanding bay, his appearance commanded admiration, and the late General was immensely proud of him*”.

Sandy was turned out to graze at the Central Remount Depot at Maribyrnong (the home and training ground of the Light Horse Brigade) where he saw out the rest of his days. Sadly, he didn’t get to Duntroon to be near his master’s grave as originally planned. He was euthanased in May 1923 due to increasing blindness and frailty. Major General Sir Cyril Brudenell Bingham White, the Army’s Chief of Staff, had proposed that Sandy’s head and neck be mounted and the hooves be preserved and mounted as trophies for presentation. White is quoted as making the following comment about Bridges “*He lacked just the little added touch which would have made him a big man. But he was a big soldier... General Birdwood has told me he came to value his advice and to depend on it. He was always thinking, and was independent enough to think for himself, and strong enough to hold his own view when others held differently*”.

The Australian War Memorial displayed Sandy’s head and neck, (right) which became part of its collection, until it deteriorated with age. According to Chris Coultard-Clarke, of the Australian War Memorial, one of the hooves is displayed in the Officer’s Mess at Duntroon House.



In 1993 the body of an Unknown Australian soldier was recovered from the Adelaide Cemetery at Villiers-Bretonneux, France and returned to Australia. In the Hall of Memory, Canberra, under a slab of marble the unidentified Australian soldier was interred with full military honours on 11 November 1993. He was buried in a Tasmanian blackwood coffin, on which were placed a bayonet and a sprig of wattle and soil from the Pozieres battlefield scattered on his tomb. Whilst Bridges and Sandy were never reunited after Egypt, they remain an intrinsic part of Australian military history with both being returned home for their final resting place.



ON THE NOTICEBOARD

V.C. NOMINATED FOR GREEN PLAQUE



Amongst the last twelve candidatures for a local Green Plaque award is Lieutenant Phillip Eric Bent V.C. D.S.O. (seen left) of the Leicestershire Regiment.

Nominated by Captain Robert Allen, M.B.E., of the Royal Tigers Association, Bent attended Ashby De La Zouch Grammar School before enlisting in the Leicestershire Regiment in 1914. Already holding the D.S.O. Bent was posthumously awarded the V.C. for his gallantry at Polygon Wood, near Zonnebeke, during the 1917 Battle of Passchendaele. His citation acknowledged "*his conspicuous bravery when, during a heavy hostile attack, Bent personally collected a Platoon that was in reserve, which he led forward to the counter attack, which was successful and the enemy was checked. He was killed whilst leading a charge which he had inspired with the call 'Come on the Tigers'.*"

Bent was 26 years of age when he fell on 1st October 1917 and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

Votes for six of the twelve candidates can be cast online before **Sunday 24th October 2021** by visiting www.leicestershire.gov.uk/leisure-and-community/history-and-heritage/the-green-plaque-awards

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The dates for next year's **Leicester Postcard Fairs** have now been announced.

These are:

Sunday 6th February 2022
&
Sunday 18th September 2022

Open from 10.00 a.m. till 3.00 p.m.

Admission £1.00

at

Holiday Inn, Leicester - Wigston

(Formerly Wigston Stage Hotel)

299 Leicester Road

Wigston Fields

Leicester

LE18 1JW



EDMOND THIEFFRY: THE FLYING JUDGE by David Humberston

Belgium's small size, limited resources and intention to remain neutral in any future conflict all led to meagre beginnings for the Belgian Air Service, the *Aviation Militaire Belge* or *AMB*. Although by 1914 four Squadrons did exist, these consisted of only four aeroplanes each, flown by five Pilots and six Observers. Ground equipment consisted of five lorries, one for each Squadron and the fifth used as a workshop. If nothing else the *AMB* was both compact and mobile when War fell upon their nation in August 1914.

Amongst the future sons of the *AMB* was one Edmond Thieffry, born in Etterbeck, a municipality of Brussels, on 28th September 1892. Wishing to pursue a career as a lawyer, he had studied at Louvain University before conscription to the Belgian Army interrupted his studies in 1912. Having served with the 14th Line Regiment until January 1914, Thieffry returned to Louvain to complete his studies with days to spare before German troops crossed the Belgian border in August 1914.



Edmond Thieffry

Recalled to the Colours, Thieffry, now of the 10th Line Regiment, served as a Staff Attache to General Gerald Leman, who commanded the defence of Liege from Fort de Loncin, one of a circle of forts surrounding the city. The Fort was subjected to heavy German artillery fire between 12th and 15th August and Leman would be carried unconscious into captivity from its ruins when it finally fell.

Thieffry had been taken Prisoner a week earlier at Herstal, a village north-east of Liege, but captivity held no appeal to our young lawyer, who promptly escaped, stole a dilapidated motorcycle and set off for the Dutch border. Arrested on arrival by the Dutch Military Police, he employed the full range of his legal skills, alongside his fluency in the Dutch language, to successfully argue his way out of potential internment. Soon he was reunited with his motorcycle, heading back to Belgium, where he re-joined his Regiment at Antwerp and moved with them as they were forced west to begin their defence of the River Yser.

Employed as a courier for messages, a visit to Coxyde airfield, "home" to 1st Escadrille (Squadron) of the *AMB*, led to Thieffry declaring his interest in aviation to the Squadron Commandant, one Captain Demanet. Informed bluntly that only an appeal to the Colonel of the General Headquarters could result in a transfer, Thieffry's powers of persuasion again proved decisive and in July 1915 he became an airman. Given the number of aeroplanes available, the consternation caused by the arrival of Edmond Thieffry leaves little to the imagination. Although fearless, he lacked finesse and quickly developed a reputation for crashing every aeroplane he attempted to fly! Soon he had managed to crash more times in training than any other trainee and so poorly did he fly that his superiors were reluctant to assign him to a two-seater Squadron for fear he would kill his Observer in a crash. One has to assume the Observers fully supported this decision!

By September 1916, enough was enough! Thieffry was sent to master the arts of single-seater flying, with a view to destroying the enemy as a fighter pilot rather than his fellow Belgians. Soon

he was in trouble again. A display of acrobatic flying, strictly forbidden following the recent deaths of two other pilots in similar escapades, led to eight days imprisonment in solitary confinement.

Finally, in December that year, Thieffry was posted to a single-seater Squadron, the 5ème Escadrille de Chase, who operated from Houthem, north-west of Ypres. The Squadron was known as “The Comets” and decorated the fuselage of their planes accordingly. Houthem was, effectively, the de-facto capital of Belgium, with the headquarters of the Belgian Army being on the edge of the aerodrome, with King Albert and the Royal family living nearby. Dedicated fighter units had only been introduced into the *AMB* in February that year, but at least Thieffry could only damage either Germans or himself. At least that was the theory! Imagine the general dismay when, two days after his arrival, he crashed again, compounding his error by making contact with the trigger of his machine guns whilst trying to extricate himself. The onlookers who were rushing to his aid promptly scattered, leaving Thieffry to emerge on his own.



Edmond Thieffry and his Nieuport 23 aircraft, bearing the symbol of a comet

Nicknamed “The Flying Judge”, Thieffry was by no means the first fighter pilot who demonstrated greater skill at fighting than in flying. His prowess as a pilot eventually improved whilst his spirit for the unorthodox remained as strong as ever. The Squadron then moved further north to the aerodrome at Les Moères from where, on 24th January 1917, Thieffry decided to fly over occupied Brussels on a personal solo mission; a 150-mile round flight.

Flying over the very rooftops of the occupied capital, his aim was to drop four small parachutes, each made from the tricoloured flag of Belgium. The first was to fall on the Church of St Michel and Gudala, the second over his old school, Jesus College St Michel, and the last two over the streets where his parents and fiancée lived. When the parachutes were retrieved from the streets, across the yellow band of each of the flags was written a message:

To the Church: *Brussels, the Belgian Army admire your heroic resistance to German occupation. See you soon. Long live Belgium. Long live the King. Edmond Thieffry.*

To the School: *Well down the Jesuites! A keepsake from an old boy. Edmond Thieffry.*

Most personally: *A very affectionate hello to my much -loved fiancé. Edmond Thieffry.*

The sheer audacity of such an action was a magnificent boost to Belgian morale. The fact that he returned to his air base with just one litre of fuel remaining in his tank merely adds to the glamour

of the story. Disciplinary action would, of course, be required. A severe reprimand may or may not have been delivered with a wink of his commander's eye . . .

On 15th March 1917, Thieffry made his first "kill", a German two-seater falling to the guns of his Nieuport Scout. Eight days later, he struck again; this time a second two-seater fell. Now he was to be decorated, the Citation for the Croix de Guerre reading: *A Fighter Pilot of uncommon bravery. On 24th January 1917 he flew over Brussels at low level. On 15th and 23rd March 1917 two enemy aircraft were forced to land abruptly.* The following day, Thieffry was engaged by two German fighters who riddled his plane with bullets. When the engine stopped, Thieffry glided down and crashed his plane in No Man's Land, quickly abandoning his craft to reach the Belgian lines before the German artillery found the range of his stricken Nieuport. The ebb and flow of aerial combat continued - on 12th May, he shot down an Albatross, the following day he was shot down himself whilst on the 14th he claimed his fourth victim although his own aeroplane caught fire and was destroyed in the subsequent landing. Thieffry escaped with a few scratches.

His tally continued to rise. Two victims fell on 3rd July, the first time this feat had been achieved by a Belgian pilot. Four more fell in August, with Thieffry now at the controls of a SPAD VII. Further decorated by the Italians, the Belgians and the French, Thieffry's 10th and final "kill" came on 10th October 1917, placing him third on the list of Belgian aces, behind the legendary Willy Coppens and Andre de Meulemeester, the "Eagle of Flanders".

On 23rd February 1918, Thieffry, in the midst of a dog fight, waited too long to open fire on his adversary, whose own fire struck Thieffry's SPAD, causing the fuel tank to catch fire. The plane spun away in the skies above Woumen, on the southern outskirts of Dixmude, with German planes in pursuit. Thieffry managed to land on a ridge, albeit with the aeroplane overturned. Wounded, the captured aviator was taken to a hospital in Coutrai. Even now the foibles of War continued to surround him. One German pilot had fired the initial shots, whilst another had pursued him to the ground. As there was now doubt about the true "victor", both men visited the captive Thieffry in hospital to ask him to settle the doubts as to whom would be awarded the "kill"!

Thieffry had been posted as "Missing" and the Belgian public held its breath and waited for news. It was some weeks before the local authorities learnt of his survival, by which time Thieffry was being held at Karlsruhe POW Camp. On 13th April 1918, Thieffry escaped, being recaptured in the Black Forest ten days later. The remainder of his War was spent in various camps, the number of which was matched only by the unsuccessful attempts Thieffry made to leave them!

At the end of the War, he made his own way home to Brussels, via Switzerland and France, arriving on 6th December 1918. Ten days later he took an oath before the Court of Appeals in Brussels, enabling him to recommence his duties as a lawyer. In February 1919 he married his fiancé and their marriage would produce five children.

Remaining active in aviation, Thieffry was one of the founders of the *Société Anonyme Belge d'Exploitation de la Navigation Aérienne* or "*Sabena*", a national airline which began operations in May 1923. Partly funded by Belgians in the Belgian Congo who had lost their internal air service a year earlier, this new airline was expected to provide a viable alternative and Thieffry began to devise a plan to undertake the first ever flight between Belgium and the Congo. At the beginning of 1925, he obtained permission from the government for this hazardous mission and *Sabena* supplied a Handley Page aeroplane, which Thieffry named "Princess Marie-Jose" after the daughter of King Albert.

Thieffry and his two companions left Brussels on 12th February 1925 for what was planned as a seven-day flight. In an epic journey of adventure, in which the trio overcame problems with oil flows, engine overheating, poor visibility, strong adverse winds and the replacement of a broken propellor, **51** days later, on 3rd April, after a journey of some 8,200 kilometres (5,095 miles) involving 75 hours of actual flight, touchdown in Leopoldville was finally achieved. The first air flight between Belgium and its Colony had been completed and Thieffry returned home to a hero's welcome.



Thieffry in colonial attire

A commercial venture, however, cannot be allowed that sort of timescale and Thieffry made two further attempts to fly to the Congo in faster time. The first in March 1928 did not progress beyond Philippeville in the Namur district of Belgium, whilst the second, three months later, ended in a marsh near Vauvert on the southern coast of France. Conscious of the need to establish an internal service in the Congo, Thieffry, accompanied by a young pilot, Julian Gascon, and a mechanic, Eugene Gastauche, sailed from Antwerp for Boma, a port town on the west of the Congo and, until 1926, its capital city. With them went an Avimeta, a metal monoplane, which they intended to pilot to Lake Tanganyika.

A flight of some 400 kilometres (248 miles) between Boma and the new capital, Leopoldville, was completed without problems, despite poor weather. Five more completed stages led to Albertsville, on the western shore of the Lake, where Thieffry was able to visit his sister, who worked as a nun in one of the city hospitals. There was now only one more stage to complete. On 11th April 1929, the aeroplane was made ready for a flight to Birava. The weather deteriorated rapidly and as the airfield became caught up in a tornado as Gascon, the pilot, fought desperately to keep the aeroplane on the ground. The craft was tossed into tall grass alongside the Lake in the Bay of Kabinga and both Thieffry and Gascon were killed. Gastauche, the third member of the crew, was more fortunate, escaping with multiple bruises and one fractured limb.

The bodies of the victims were buried on a hill some 200 metres (219 yards) from the shores of the Lake and a monument was erected on the spot. Repatriation was not considered; Madame Thieffry being content that *“the only place suitable to receive the remains of my brave husband was the land of Africa he had loved so much”*.

Many tributes have been paid to the 36-year-old aviator. In 1932 the *Sabena* Offices unveiled a plaque commemorating the epic flight to the Congo, whilst in 1975 a commemorative stamp marked the 50th anniversary of his epic flight to the Congo. The following year a Metro Station and a Street in Brussels were both given his name whilst in September 1992, the centenary of his birth was marked at Etterbeek with the unveiling of a memorial bust, shown right, in his honour. All five of Thieffry's children and numerous grand and great grandchildren were present to mark the occasion.



Like the Comet that decorated his aircraft, Edmond Thieffry shone brightly during his lifetime and left a warm afterglow long after his premature departure . . .

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