

Wilfred Picton Warlow – a Flyer Lost at Sea By Liz Walton

Lost at sea was the final verdict on the death of Captain Wilfred Picton Warlow of the Welsh Regiment, attached to the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), who died aged 30 on the 20th, or possibly the 5th December, 1914. Born on the 6th April, 1884 in Wales, he was the son of Colonel John Picton Turbervill, previously Picton Warlow, a former officer in the Madras Staff Corps, who had changed his name by deed poll as a result of inheriting Ewenny Manor, a large property in Wales, in 1891. Wilfred was one of a large family - in 1891 there were six children living at home in Wales. They were Violet, aged 21, Edith and Bea, twins aged 18, Ivor and Arthur, twins aged 9, and Wilfred aged 7. All were children of John Picton Warlow's second wife Eleanor, by whom he had twelve children including three sets of twins. After Eleanor's death in 1887 he had remarried and his third wife, Caroline Turbervill completed the family at this stage, though she went on to have several more children. In 1901 Wilfred was at Clifton College in Bristol, but he transferred to Elizabeth College (Roll Number 3015) later that year. Ivor was a Second Lieutenant with the 3rd Gordon Highlanders Imperial Yeomanry at Aldershot, whilst Arthur, his twin, was living in Guernsey and working on his own account as a fruit grower at the Castel. By 1911, Arthur had moved to Brighton where he worked as a market gardener, Ivor was still with the Gordon Highlanders and Wilfred was an Army officer in the Welsh Regiment, staying with another older brother, Robert at the time of the census. He had been gazetted Second Lieutenant to the 2nd Battalion, the Welsh Regiment from the Royal Guernsey Militia on 28th January, 1903, then was promoted to Lieutenant on 28th November, 1906, then Captain on 7th June, 1913.



So when war broke out, two of the three brothers listed above were already in the armed forces, but all three would go on to serve. Ivor remained with the 1st Battalion, the Gordon Highlanders, was taken prisoner of war¹ and ended up as a Lieutenant Colonel, later changing his name by deed poll to Picton Turbervill. Wilfred (left) was by this time attached to the RFC. The Corps had been formed in April, 1912 as the military began to recognise the potential for aircraft as observation platforms. The archives of *Flight* magazine show that he had gained his Aviator's certificate (Number 451) in a Bristol Biplane at the Bristol School of Flying, Brooklands on 1st April, 1913. He was with Number 3 Squadron, RFC based at Netheravon at that time. The *London*

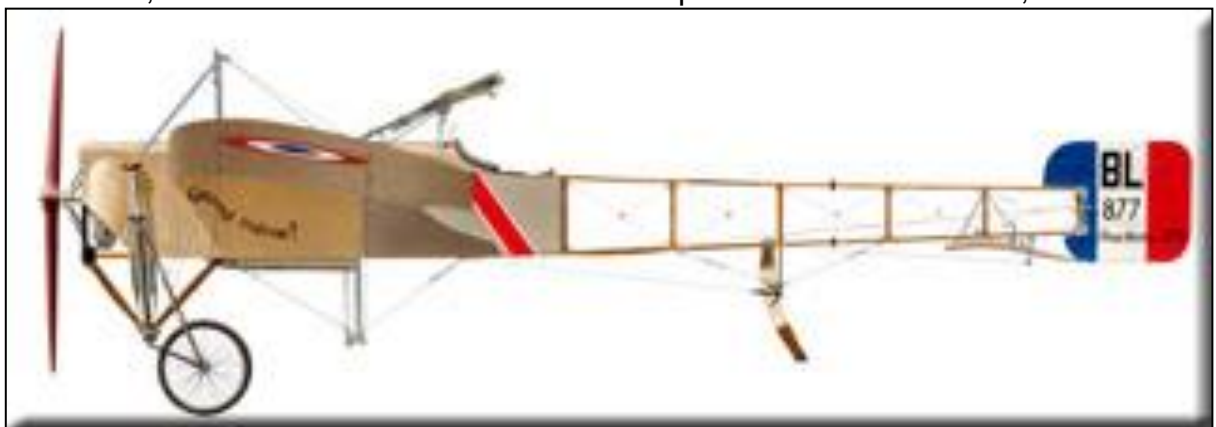
¹ Editor's Comment: He was taken prisoner on the 10th September, 1914, interned in Holland on 22nd January, 1918 and repatriated to the UK on 22nd November, 1918

Gazette for 2nd September, 1913 shows that he was appointed Flying Officer on 14th August, 1913, and he then joined Number 6 Squadron and was promoted to Flight Commander of 'A' Flight in May, 1914. He later changed Squadrons but there appears to be no record as to which Squadron he belonged to at the time of his death.

Wilfred Picton Warlow went to France as soon as war broke out. Between the 13th and 15th August, 1914 Numbers 2, 3, 4 and 5 Squadrons, RFC, under the command of Brigadier-General David Henderson, deployed to France in support of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). These four Squadrons with 12 aircraft each, together with aircraft in depots, gave a total strength of 63 aircraft supported by 900 men. Their main job at this stage was to undertake reconnaissance and artillery observation. On 19th August, 1914 the first RFC reconnaissance flight of the war was made from Maubeuge in Belgium by Captain Joubert de la Ferte in a Bleriot of Number 3 Squadron and Lieutenant GW Mapplebeck in a BE2 of Number 4 Squadron. During September at the Battle of the Aisne, the RFC made its first operational use of aerial photography and also made use of wireless telegraphy to communicate with those on the ground and with other aircraft during observation flights over enemy artillery positions.

As early as December, 1914 *Flight* magazine stated that: "...new uses for aircraft and their pilots are daily being found." Soon there was conflict between aircraft doing the same job for different sides, and from this developed the famous aerial duels. Few aircraft were armed but pilots and observers were issued with revolvers. Raids on Dusseldorf, Cologne and Friedrichshafen are mentioned, where the pilots would have to drop bombs from their flimsy aeroplanes. Planes were also used for spotting enemy mines and submarines in the North Sea, though this was more the province of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), the RFC dealing primarily with flights over land. At the start of the Great War, Britain had some 113 aircraft in military service, the French Aviation Service 160 and the German Air Service 246. By the end of the war each side was deploying thousands of aircraft.

it was against this background that on 20th December, 1914 (according to most sources) or 5th December, 1914 (according to his service record which is in the National Archives), after four months of war service Wilfred Picton Warlow took off from the Air Park at St Omer in a Bleriot two seater monoplane, with the intention of flying back to England on leave. The Air Park had deployed initially from Farnborough in England to Boulogne when war broke out, then after four more moves ended up in St Omer in October, 1914.



It was first called the Lines of Communication Workshop, then the Flying Depot and finally Air(craft) Park, and it was where aircraft maintenance and repair took place. Picton Warlow was flying a two seater monoplane, the Blériot XI² (above), a two-seat tractor monoplane with 80 hp Gnome rotary engines, designed from the start as a battlefield observation aeroplane. When the war broke in Europe in 1914, Numbers 3, 9, 10, 18 and 30 Squadrons of the French "Aviation Militaire" were equipped with this type, along with Numbers 1, 3, 7 and 16 Squadrons from the RFC, and a few were also assigned to the RNAS. However by late 1914 they were in the process of being taken out of service as they had been found to be too slow to climb with a full military load. Redundant aircraft were taken back to the Air Park where they would either be scrapped and used for spares or flown back to England where they could still be used as training aircraft. Picton Warlow was flying one of these elderly aeroplanes back to England but he never arrived.

A Committee of Enquiry into the administration and command of the RFC sat on the 26th July, 1916 to investigate, amongst other things, the circumstances of Picton Warlow's death. A full report is given in *Flight* magazine for 17th August, 1916², and there are also brief references in editions published in the period between the sitting and the final report. It started with a report in *Hansard*, the printed transcript of parliamentary debates, of Mr Pemberton Billing MP accusing the administration and higher command of the RFC of criminal negligence, because of the number and manner of pilot deaths since the start of the war. Noel Pemberton Billing was an English aviator, inventor, entrepreneur, and the Member of Parliament for Mile End at the time of the enquiry. In politics he was known for his extreme right-wing views, and his promotion of air power, advocating the creation of a separate air force, unattached to either the Army or Navy. He was known during the First World War for his homophobic conspiracy theories, and his strong antipathy towards the Royal Aircraft Factory and its products. Captain Picton Warlow was said by him to have been one of the victims of the RFC's negligence, as the aircraft he was flying was:

"... worn out and not considered of any further use for active service in France."

An official Committee of Enquiry was ordered. In the course of the evidence, the Committee was told that:

"... it is a very pernicious habit in France that when there is an old machine that they want to get back and which is no use for any further service and a pilot is going home on leave, if he likes to go home in it he can do so. It is a dangerous habit to endanger a valuable pilot's life to get an old crock of an aeroplane back to England, and this save transport."

A Colonel Beatty, (this was probably Colonel William Dawson Beatty, RE and RFC, who was Assistant Director of Military Aeronautics at the time) who was at St Omer when Picton Warlow took off, was called to give evidence in

² <http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1916/1916%20-%200698.html>

defence. He stated that it was not a question of being ordered or allowed to fly back, it was a privilege afforded to experienced flyers who were going home on leave. He was asked:

“When it was decided to discard types of machines which were outclassed by newer types, what was done with the discarded machines?”

Colonel Beatty replied that:

“A machine which could be of real use for training purposes, whenever possible, was flown to England. If a machine was fit to fly across, then the pilot who was coming across was allowed to fly it.”

The aircraft had been serviced recently, with the officer in charge of the repair section taking responsibility for it being fit to fly, and Picton Warlow took it on a short trial flight before taking off for England.

The weather was apparently fine but with some wind and high banks of cloud when he took off from St Omer. He had enough fuel for twice the length of his planned journey (the aircraft could carry enough for three and a half hours' flying and his journey time should have been no more than one hour twenty minutes). He was seen passing over Calais, from where it was reported to be clear enough to see the English coast. That was the last that was heard of him, and it was assumed that he flew into high cloud, got lost and ran out of fuel before plunging into the English Channel. It was said that even the best pilot could miss his bearings if he was in cloud for more than five or ten minutes, and Picton Warlow may have “missed England completely.” The effects of the cold are not mentioned here but other reports of the era states that two hours' flying was about the maximum that anyone could stand, even at the relatively low level of 7,000 feet, said to be the minimum height for safety from German attack.



Wilfred Picton Warlow's service record shows that he was initially listed as missing from 20th December, 1914, then as deceased, lost at sea on 5th December, 1914. All other sources give his date of death as 20th December, and as yet no explanation has been found for this discrepancy. Also there is no record of his squadron, the most

likely reason being given that he was about to take over as Squadron Leader of one of the new squadrons after returning from leave. His death is commemorated by the CWGC but is not recorded in either of "The Sky Their Battlefield" or "Airmen Died in the Great War". As his body was never found

he is commemorated on the Flying Services Memorial (above left) in the Faubourg d'Amiens cemetery in Arras, Northern France, as well as on the Elizabeth College Roll of Honour in Guernsey. He was awarded the 1914 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

Incidentally, though Wilfred is the only member of the family listed on a local memorial, in the course of researching this article it was found that the family's links with the island were stronger than it initially appeared. Wilfred's brother Arthur³ was another victim of the Great War who had local connections. After his spell as a grower in Guernsey and Brighton he went to East Africa, where he took South African citizenship and settled as a planter at Kaimoi-Kisumu, in what is now Kenya. When war broke out he joined the East African Rifles as a Lance Corporal and served with the Expeditionary Force in Africa. He died on 8th November, 1917 at Mombasa of malaria contracted whilst on active service. He had transferred to the African Labour Corps as a Corporal by this time. He is buried in Mbariki Military Cemetery in Mombasa. There is a further Guernsey connection in that a sister, Violet, married Ralph Durand, the son of Havilland Durand of Guernsey and his wife, Mary Hawtrey. Mary was the daughter of the Reverend Montague Hawtrey of Berkshire, who became rector of St James in Guernsey in 1839, and Louisa Dobrée of Guernsey. Ralph was Librarian at the Priaulx Library in Guernsey, where much of my research on Guernsey and the Great War has been done, from 1929 to 1945.

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³ UK, *De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour, 1914-1924, Vol 4, p 225*