

Captain Victor William Harrison



[Image is from author's own collection]

By Pamela Lee

Captain Victor William Harrison

Summary

Captain Victor William Harrison enlisted on 1 September 1914 as Private Harrison in 11th Empire Battalion Royal Fusiliers. He was commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the 13th Battalion The Royal Fusiliers, transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, and in 1915 aged 20 years gained his "wings".

In June 1916 he was posted to 25 Squadron in France and had two tours of duty on the Western Front. In August 1917 following a crash landing Victor sustained serious injuries. These injuries were such as to result in his being invalided from the Royal Flying Corps.

While still recuperating he was tragically drowned on the Norfolk Broads in September 1918, aged 23. Victor's name is on the War Memorial in Worthing together with his younger brother Cyril Henry Harrison.

Introduction

Captain Victor Harrison was my uncle. This project enables me to record his short career in memory of my mother, Nielia, who was his beloved younger sister.

Background

In 1914 Victor was a typist in Messrs Graham & Co, London. He was one of eight children whose father was a Justice of the Peace, a stockbroker and an import/export merchant in Madras, India. The family lived in Worthing, West Sussex. On the outbreak of War Victor enlisted in the 11th Battalion Royal Fusiliers. Victor's brother Cyril also served in the army and a case study has been compiled for this project.

Detail

Victor William Harrison was born on 5 April 1895. The family at that time were living at Bush Hill Park, Middlesex. He was educated at Bishop's Stortford College with his younger brother Cyril.

Following the outbreak of the First World War he enlisted on 1 September 1914 in the 11th Battalion The Royal Fusiliers. In January 1915 he was commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the 13th Battalion Royal Fusiliers. While based at Ludgershall, Wiltshire, he was transferred in May 1915 to the Royal Flying Corps. He had not yet been posted when, in June 1915, he wrote to his cousin Horace (three years his junior) as follows:

"We see dozens of our own biplanes on the 'plain', as there are two large flying schools only four miles from us. I am certain Ludgershall is the very worst place I know. There are only two small general shops and both are useless, as they only stock things they have no demand for".¹

It is clear that he needed more excitement than was provided by the infantry. On 19 December 1915 he gained his “wings” at The Military School, Thetford, certificated on a Maurice Farman biplane. The following January he experienced a major accident which he described to his cousin Horace in a letter as follows:

Image from author's own collection



Victor in front of his Vickers Gun Bus.
 Photograph from author's collection.

“I had a very bad 'crash' on Sunday afternoon. I was flying a Maurice Farman 'Shorthorn', when some portion of the machine gave way at about 500 feet, and the machine nose-dived to the ground, giving me concussion, and only a few minor injuries. I have been in Hospital ever since and have only just been allowed to read and write. After rescuing this letter, with great difficulty, as it was on me at the time, I am unable to give you any spicy details as to what exactly happened, as I happen to be suffering from loss of memory for that day, but I hear it was the very worst smash anyone had seen, as nothing whatever was left except the engine, so they made a bonfire of the remainder. At the Court of Inquiry, eye-witnesses say the machine turned several somersaults, finally resting upside down and when they found me, I was hanging upside down from the seat, and only kept in by my belt, so they had to cut me out”.



Victor's quarters at Thetford. From author's collection, original has been donated to the Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon

By April 1916 he was recovered from his accident and wrote to his cousin Ursula with details of his daily routine at Thetford:

“We start the day by getting up at 5.30am and get to the sheds at 6.15am; then we get the machines tested and ready

and start flying at 6.30am until 8.15am, then breakfast and start again at 9.00am, and go on until 12.45pm, then start again at 2.00pm until about 7.00pm or 7.30pm if light enough with half an hour for tea. Dinner from 8.00pm until 9.30pm and after that am only too glad to get to bed. It is the same every day – Saturday and Sunday as well.”²

Eventually posted to 25 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, in France in June 1916, he had two tours of duty on the Western Front in the course of the next year. In the hell of the skies over the Front, the average survival span for a new pilot was eight weeks. On arrival in France, Victor supervised the erection of new hangars after which he and a colleague received a letter complimenting them from Major Trenchard, British Expeditionary Force.



Group photo of the team from 25 Squadron who supervised the erection of the hangars in France. Victor is third from the left in the front row.

From author's collection, original has been donated to the Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon

Victor writes again on 6 September 1916 to his cousin Horace as follows:

“Last Sunday morning I was struck in the back by lightning, and I have been rather seedy ever since, and this morning I fainted in a shop, so I have got to see the military doctor at Shoreham in the morning. It is jolly rotten as I have not seen you for years, and would have liked to have gone to Town tomorrow but this has made it very awkward. I have had constant headaches ever since. I hope I shall be able to see you sometime”.³

Victor appears in a number of publications on WWI aces because he and his observer (Leslie Court, a future observer ace), were involved in a dogfight with German aces Albert Dossenbach and Hans Schilling over Tourmignes, south of Lille on 27 September 1916. The German two-seater crash-landed in flames, with Dossenbach slightly injured and Schilling suffering burns. Victor's FE2B was also brought down with the occupants surviving.

This information is from a book called "Who Downed the Aces in WWI" by Norman Franks.⁵

In June 1917 Victor was stationed at The Central Flying School at Upavon, Wiltshire, training on new fast machines but uncertain whether he was going to be made an instructor or to be sent back to France on a third tour. In August in a heavy landing at the Central Flying School in a Scout Experimental 5, the very latest fighter which proved superior to all its German opponents, Victor sustained serious injuries, which at first caused his life to be despaired of. Promotion to Captain came through while he was on his sick bed, but his injuries led to his discharge six months later.

Having survived his experiences in the Royal Flying Corps he commenced retraining on a Technical Course organised by the Ministry of Labour in Norwich. Tragically, he was drowned on 1 September 1918 in a boating accident on the Norfolk Broads. His grave is in the churchyard of St Nicholas's, Buckenham, Norfolk where his brother Cyril is also commemorated. At the time of his death the private address of Captain Victor Harrison was 7 The Esplanade, Worthing, where his name is on the War Memorial.



Victor's grave in Buckenham, Norfolk.
Image from the author's collection

Victor was awarded the following medals:

Victory Medal⁶
British War Medal⁷
Silver War Badge⁸

Conclusion

All my life I have remembered my mother, Nielia, mourning the loss of my uncles Victor and Cyril, and saying how difficult it had been for her and her mother and sisters to celebrate with everyone else at the time of the Armistice.

With thanks to my cousin Christopher Harrison who helped me to write this Case Study and my cousin Ian Petherick who researched and provided pictures and letters for much of Victor's story.

Endnotes

-
- 1 Letter from Victor Harrison to Horace Harrison dated 2 June 1915
 - 2 Letter from Victor Harrison to Ursula Hampden-Pye dated 8 April 1916
 - 3 Letter from Victor Harrison to Horace Harrison dated 6 September 1916
 - 5 "Who Downed the Aces in WWI" by Norman Franks
 - 6 British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Card 1914-1920 from ancestry.co.uk
 - 7 British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Card 1914-1920 from ancestry.co.uk
 - 8 Silver War Badge Records 1914-1920 Off/566