

Letter from an Airman

A Case Study of Louis Belloc



(Photograph of Sopwith Camel from G.T. Cooper, *Horsham's Heroes of the Great War*, Friends of Horsham Museum, 2009)

By Simon Machin

Introduction

The recent discovery and publication¹ of a lost letter written by a brave young airman, Louis Belloc throws a sidelight on the training of Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots just before the last push to victory in the summer of 1918. The discovery is made all the more poignant by the death of Louis on active service in France less than a month later. The letter has been made available by the kind permission of the publishers of *The Bellocian*, a journal that celebrates the life and work of distinguished Sussex writer, Hilaire Belloc, the father of Louis.

Louis Belloc's Letter to Lady Carnavon

Sometimes historians will admit that composing the fragments of a life cut short by The Great War, 'the war to end all wars', can feel like reconstructing a jigsaw that has its most vivid piece missing: the recorded experience of the dead combatant. Granted, the memoirs of surviving service-men, who returned to civilian life in 1918, generally give a more rounded picture of what the war achieved. This is because they lived to be able to frame the battle experience within the peace that preceded and followed it. Yet the recorded testament of one of the fallen - those who never returned to peacetime - affords something different and fresher: a snapshot from a life that is being conducted very much in the immediate present, with a sense of hope for the future often mixed with a sense of foreboding. These testaments also possess an innate poignancy, since we know something that the writer could never know for certain; the awareness that his or her thoughts would be read posthumously.

The circumstances surrounding the death of Second Lieutenant Louis Belloc, son of the Sussex-based writer Hilaire, whose love for his adopted county suffuses his poetry and prose work, adds a further dimension to this poignancy. For a long-forgotten letter, written by Louis in August 1918 and still largely decipherable, has recently been discovered hidden in the pages of a book given by his correspondent, Lady Carnarvon, to a family friend. Almost a hundred years on, the personality of this young airman - courteous, intelligent and high-spirited - who went missing barely three weeks after writing it rises fresh from the page. With considerable vividness, it also gives insight into the characteristic

experiences and expectations of the public school men who filled the ranks of the RAF.

The letter was written on Tuesday 6 August from the airfield at Turnberry, Ayrshire (where Louis had only just been posted) to Teversal, near Mansfield in Nottingham, a landed estate owned by Lady Carnavon, the mother of one of his father Hilaire's Oxford University contemporaries, Aubrey Herbert, a noted adventurer upon whom the character Sandy Arbuthnot is based in John Buchan's wartime spy novels. Lady Carnarvon had been kind to Hilaire's late American wife, Elodie, before their marriage, and the tone of the letter reveals a well-brought up young man thanking a family friend for recent hospitality. The visit itself may possibly have been inspired by a sense of duty, since Louis was then temporarily stationed at a nearby airfield before moving to Ayrshire. He appears literally to have made a flying visit in an RAF aeroplane at an 'absurd hour', and the Teversal hospitality on Wednesday 31 July had been curtailed by the need to navigate in daylight.

As well as apologising for his sudden but justified departure, Louis is writing to reassure Lady Carnavon about his safety, since flying technology was still in its infancy and the piloting of fighter-planes a perilous activity. Although savouring the romance of flight, the letter is honest about the difficulty of successful navigation, and when his cockpit map became too dirty to use on the return flight, Louis was forced to interpret barely-recognisable landmarks in a nerve-wracking endeavour to track a course back across the Midlands to his aerodrome and make a safe landing. His reference to things beginning to get desperate seems less dramatic when it is remembered that two-thirds of RAF fatalities occurred during training at flying schools before pilots reached the front². For this reason, it is not surprising that informal flights like this one were forbidden by the aerodromes, even if youthful exuberance made such jaunts inevitable.

Louis's bravado is typical of the psychological make-up of air force personnel, and reflects both the informality and elite status of its young pilots. From its formation in 1912, the ethos of the Royal Flying Corps (which only in 1918 became the modern Royal Air Force) had been firmly public school³, and when war led to volunteer enlistment there were many more applicants than places.

Entry was assisted by having an influential friend or relative in the armed services. By 1918 the need for pilots had increased, necessitated by the high death-rate and the much increased number of aircraft, but there was still no shortage of applicants from prestigious educational establishments. Louis had briefly been in the Royal Engineers where he had been gassed on the Somme, before deciding to transfer to service in the air. The product of a top Catholic boarding school, Downside⁴ and the son of a famous writer and former M.P. with friendships in the English aristocracy, he fitted well the profile of new entrants and his transfer would have been regarded as a brave and patriotic decision because the RAF was informally known as the suicide club amongst army officers.

Louis informs Lady Carnarvon that he has transferred to Turnberry to be given aerial gunnery practice before going out to France. By 1918, the emphasis on training, though still far from perfect, had moved on considerably from the start of the war, when selection was influenced by having obtained the flying ticket of the Royal Aero Club, an expensive undertaking in itself, and being thought to be made of the right stuff in a perfunctory interview which could include questions like 'do you ride?' The formidable leader of the new corps, Hugh Trenchard, nicknamed 'Boom' because of his low and powerful voice, was notorious for possessing limited flying experience, having obtained his RAC ticket with only 64 minutes in the air⁵. To be given gunnery training at all would have been unnecessary in 1914, because planes were used primarily for aerial reconnaissance. Even then, the endorsement of Douglas Haig had helped overcome conservative War Office thinking⁶ which had believed that the cavalry could undertake the mapping of enemy lines. Trenchard has consistently to fight for proper resourcing of his flying corps, which before 1914 had lagged behind the innovation and investment of the French and Germans and struggled during hostilities to catch up both in numbers and in technical sophistication at key points in the war.

Turnberry was an improvised site for training, set on attractive Scottish coastline, and formerly a golf-course before its requisition. The mysterious initials in the letter, G & S.W.R. describing the hotel refer to the Glasgow and South Western Railway. Opened in 1906 as the first golf resort of its kind for the

luxury market with a hundred rooms with full electric lighting and lifts and suites of bathrooms fitted with plunge baths, showers and wave technology, it was a prestigious symbol of the same modern spirit of technological advance that led to the motor car and the demonstration of powered flight at Kittyhawk in 1903 by the Wright Brothers. The Railway had developed the hotel as an entrepreneurial initiative, since the London elite were linked to Ayrshire by a series of main and branch lines, so it was possible for a City man to get on the sleeper train and be on Turnberry's fine links, designed by a Troon golf professional, the following morning. Still impressionable, Louis is surprised to be living in the lap of luxury, now the hotel has been turned into an officer's mess, but good living had been the constant experience of Britain's young aviators. When flying corps pilots first crossed to France in 1915 they expected the same primitive living conditions as army subalterns but found themselves, instead, booked into comfortable hotels⁷. Conviviality and individualism were permitted, as evidenced by the use of nicknames, and drilling and square-bashing only became routine in 1916. Yet the high quality of life was matched by its almost inevitable shortness, given the high death-rate in practice flying in unreliable machines taught by nerve-shattered pilots returning from battle service or in sorties against German planes, like the Fokker, whose pilots often had superior fire-power, better control of their machines and less naively aggressive tactics. Trenchard had been obliged to issue the ominous command that dead or wounded airmen should be immediately replaced so that the following morning in the officer's mess there should be 'a full breakfast table, with no empty chairs'⁸.

We know something of the regime at Aerial Gunnery School No 1, Turnberry through the memoirs of a surviving US pilot, Robert Todd, one of several American pilots who flew with the British, some of whom are commemorated on the Turnberry war memorial. Todd styles himself a Sopwith Fighter Ace, which is a reference to the Camel, a plane with considerable combat success, but inherently temperamental and difficult to fly⁹. Belloc may have known that this was the plane used at Turnberry, because he tells Lady Carnarvon that immediately upon learning of his posting from the Midlands he asks permission to use the airfield's Camel for the day. At the Gunnery School, the Camels were equipped with two Vickers machine guns which fired through the propeller. Aviators practiced firing at plane silhouettes placed on the beach. The planes

were also equipped with cameras guns which were used in mock aerial dogfights to show which pilots had made a kill.

Louis anticipated being at Turnberry for at least three weeks, even though he knew that the ability to fly a Camel would increase the possibility of an early posting to France. By the summer of 1918 the German offensive, Operation Michael, had run out of steam, and the deployment of an American expeditionary force of more than a million men meant that an Allied victory was no longer in doubt. Yet the loss of young pilots was also reaching a peak. Two days after Louis wrote his letter, the Royal Air Force lost one hundred aircraft and eighty-six men in the Battle of Amiens, its highest loss on any day during the entire war.¹⁰ By this stage of fighting, air support had become indispensable to ground offensives¹¹. Yet the role undertaken by British aviators could be very different from the romanticized picture of aerial combat, however horrible its outcome, when an Allied pilot might have to choose between staying in the cockpit of a burning plane, shooting himself or jumping to certain death, as no parachutes were issued. Instead, many aviators were engaged in low-flying missions to strafe German trenches with tracer bullets, an activity which caused nightmares and could lead to a sense of futility at such mechanised slaughter.

Louis had not only reached France within the three weeks predicted in his letter; he had also participated in and failed to return from a sortie to bomb German transport columns. Such a short spell in service at the front was not uncommon. The veteran pilot, Arthur Gould Lee, witnessing the quick passing of another politician's son, Andrew Bonar Law¹², wondered why young men who had barely started in life and might have made an impact in public life, like their fathers, had to die.

Conclusion

The impact upon Hilaire at his beloved Sussex home, King's Land at Shipley was worsened by the lack of finality and he clung on for several months to the hope that Louis had been taken prisoner. In this predicament he parallels the experience of another Sussex writer, Rudyard Kipling, whose eighteen-year-old son, John, had disappeared at the Battle of Loos in 1915, his body unidentified

during his father's lifetime. By an eerie coincidence, Kipling had anticipated the numbing grief of bereavement in a short story, 'Mary Postgate' written the year before John's death. The tragic figure in this tale is a young airman, who like Louis proudly flies his plane on an unofficial visit to his relatives, a few days before being killed in training. Belloc took the news even harder than Kipling. When Hilaire's wife, Elodie, had died in 1914 he had reacted by permanently locking the door to her bedroom. His son's bedroom was now locked too and Hilaire wore black for the rest of his long life¹³.

Second Lieutenant Louis Belloc is commemorated on the Arras Flying Services Memorial in the Faubourg-d'Amiens Cemetery in the Boulevard du General de Gaulle. Designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the Memorial bears the name of 1,000 airmen of the Royal Naval Air Service, Royal Flying Corps, and their successor, the Royal Air Force, who were killed on the Western Front and have no known grave. The definitive facts about the death of Louis on 26 August 1918 are not certain, but recent research by a Belloc descendant suggests it may have resulted from return fire while attacking a German ammunition train. Even if his body had been identified and recovered, it would have been buried at the Front, and Rudyard Kipling as an Imperial War Grave Commissioner was influential in the decision not to repatriate dead servicemen for burial, since this would have divided the families of the upper and middle classes, who could afford to, from the bereaved parents of ordinary servicemen. This is not to say that grieving families did not find their own way of commemorating their sons, perhaps through public-spirited gestures that led in Sussex to Adastral Park in Hassocks being made available to the general public, its name being derived from the Royal Flying Corps motto, Per Ardua ad Astra – Through Difficulties to the Stars – an apt epitaph for young men like Louis Belloc.

Appendix A: Louis Belloc's letter to Lady Carnarvon

No 1. Fighting School RAF
Turnberry
Ayrshire
Scotland

6 August 1918

Dear Lady Carnavon

I am now doing my last course before going to France (aerial gunnery) and I thought you would like to know how I got on last Wednesday night.

Thank you very much indeed for looking after me and giving me dinner in spite of the absurd hour of my arrival. I am so sorry that I rushed away when I did; it was very rude of me but I had to get back that night and the darkness waits for nobody.

The darkness seemed much worse when I got up in the air, the [] lines (my only hope) wer[e] [com]pletely invisible and my [map] was so dirty that I couldn't read it at all.

So I went blindly on, keeping what was left of the sunset on my left and keeping a sharp look out for the River Trent which failed to put in an appearance. Matters were beginning to get desperate; I had already been flying 7 minutes which meant that I was over 12 miles away, and the river Trent had to be crossed somewhere, when I suddenly saw a line of lakes which turned out to be in the grounds of Welbeck Abbey, over which I had flown about 10 days previously so I was saved. Eventually I reached the aerodrome at 9.30, made quite a good landing and put the machine to bed; no one saw me arrive so all was well.

Next morning I was told that I would leave for [Turn]berry at 9.30 a.m. so I [asked perm]ission to have the "Camel" for the day.

I visited several aerodromes where I knew people, the furthest away being Duxford, 10 miles south of Cambridge. That was the first time I had ever seen.

On my way back, I stopped at Newark which is only 19 miles from the aerodrome, so I got too careless about leaving and never got off the ground until 9.30 p.m. with a very cloudy sky!

This time I landed on the aerodrome at 9.45 pm!! It was very exciting, peering out over the side, trying to see whether you were 5 or 20 feet above the ground; however, I got down quite safely without breaking anything.

I got here on Friday evening, and will be here about three weeks; with luck, I will get out earlier because there is a great demand and first at [] for camel pilots

We are living in the lap of luxury here; our quarters all the G & S.W.R. hotel (complete with all its furniture and fittings!!!) right on the beach and the food appears to be unlimited; we work very hard but the work is very interesting indeed; the first week is spent on the ground learning everything about our gun and the remaining weeks is aerial fighting and firing (at targets in the sea).

I hope I shall be able to fly to Teversal again later on, and arrive at a reasonable hour (also arrive officially; my last visit was very unofficial, as far as the RAF authorities were concerned!)

Thanking you once again for your kindness.

I remain yours very sincerely

Louis Belloc

Endnotes

¹ E. Eustace, 'Letter from Louis Belloc to Lady Carnavon', *The Bellocian*, 14 (1) (2012) pp.2-4

² I. Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs: The Short and Heroic Lives of the Young Aviators Who Fought and Died in the First World War*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012), p. 66.

³ Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p. 58.

⁴ A. N. Wilson, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc*, (Harper Collins, 2002), p. 210.

⁵ Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p. 34.

⁶ Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p. 36.

⁷ Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p. 20.

⁸ Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p. 135.

⁹ Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p. 160.

¹⁰ Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p. 309.

¹¹ R. Barker, *A Brief History of the Royal Flying Corps in World War I*, (Robinson, 2002), p.482.

¹² Mackersay, *No Empty Chairs*, p.301.

¹³ Wilson, *Old Thunder*, p. 237.