

# 'Moth' Eaton: From Trench to Sky

by Mitch Williamson

Photographs from the Charles Eaton Collection unless indicated

Charles Eaton was born on 21 December 1895, the only son of William, master butcher, and his wife Maude Eaton of Lambeth, South London. Due to his family's financial circumstances the young Charles had to leave school at 14 to commence his working life as an assistant with the Battersea Town Council, South London. At the age of 17 Eaton joined a territorial unit of the Royal West Surreys as a private soldier and thus began a remarkable



Private Charles Eaton, with his mother and father, and sisters Margery (left) and Constance, before he first went to France.

life of survival and perseverance in which he soon became a trench bomber, an 'incurable' prisoner-of-war escapee, a pioneer aviator in air passenger transportation and of aerial surveying in India. Later, he became a flying legend in Northern Australia, a senior Royal Australian Air Force officer in WWII, a high-ranking diplomat, and in 1947, an original initiator of United Nations military peace-keepers.

## OVER THE TOP

Private Eaton left for France with the 47th (TF) London Division's Cyclist Company on 14 March 1915 disembarking at Le Havre early the following morning. His letters say little about his life as a soldier and what he did write was frustratingly brief, perhaps due to his reticence to describe the war. For example, 25 months in the front-line and participating in the battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert, Givenchy-la-Bassée, 'over the top' with the third wave at Loos, all in 1915, then Vimy Ridge and on the Somme in 1916; finally chasing German Uhlans on his bicycle at Bois de Savy during the German strategic withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line 1917, he summed up in a single sentence:

Of course, the usual experiences which have so often been told regarding the trench warfare in Europe, the usual excitement, followed by periods of dull monotony -- all this until 1917.

In circumstances similar to those of many air crew, who had previously experienced conditions in the trenches before being transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, Eaton's time at the front was 'the usual excitement'. Cyclists companies were used as support troops, trench bombers and to 'fill the gap' when front lines were under pressure or overwhelmed by German soldiers. As a trench bomber Eaton's experiences can best be described by British Army records pertaining to his unit's participation in the trench battle of Givenchy, 25-26 May 1915.

The 24th battalion (by runner) sent me a message (timed 8.40pm) saying they were unable to advance with A., B. and C. Companies which were now about I.4, but were endeavouring to consolidate, and required bombs in large quantities. I sent him up bombs and shortly afterwards a party of Divisional Cyclist Co. who had been trained

as bombers under 2nd Lieut. K. G. GUNN arrived at my headquarters and I sent them up to report to Colonel Simpson. This party did exceptionally good work.' (Brigadier C. Willoughby, OC., 142nd Infantry Brigade; Report to 47th (London) Division: 29th May 1915).

'I should like to draw attention to the good work done by the bombers both of this battalion and the Divisional Cyclist Company. The battalion bombers went into action 75 strong and came out numbering 17. The total casualties of the battalion during these 24 hours were 5 officers killed, 3 officers wounded, other ranks: 52 killed, 252 wounded, 96 missing.

(War Diary of 24th Battalion London Regiment: May 1915)

Eaton was one of the few who answered the bomber's roll call on the following morning's muster. During this very fierce encounter, 22 year old Lance-Corporal Leonard James Keyworth of the 24th Battalion of the London Regiment, won the Victoria Cross. He stood fully exposed to the enemy for two hours on the top of their parapet and threw about 150 bombs amongst the Germans who were only a few yards away. This young soldier was killed four months later in action at Abbeville, on 19 October 1915.

Charles Eaton transferred with his school friend and Sergeant Charles G. Napier DCM *Medaille Militaire* to the RFC on 14 May 1917. It is believed that it was at Napier's instigation and encouragement that Eaton made this step that profoundly changed the course of his life. Promoted as a Captain, Napier served with 20 and 48 Squadrons, was later decorated with the MC, and claimed nine enemy aircraft shot down. He was killed on 15 May 1918 and was buried at Arras, just four days after Eaton joined 206 Sqn at Flez/Bray Dunes France.

Eaton described his transfer to the RFC; first to Winchester on 14 May 1917; then a few weeks later to the Air Training School at Oxford in the following words:

I was posted to the Royal Flying Corps and with very great pleasure left my Infantry Regiment to train as a pilot in

Private Charles Eaton, Royal West Surrey Regiment, 1912-17.

