

KILLED BY A CAMEL

The unfortunate end of Driver Samuel Webster ASC

By J.B.E. Hale

IT IS TRULY AMAZING what hidden gems can be found on the internet. I was researching men who are commemorated on war memorials near to my home town, and one of the names was Samuel Webster. On a popular genealogical website, I found a full set of service papers for one Samuel Webster, but it was immediately apparent, from his address, that he was not the man I was seeking, who is remembered on the war memorial outside Christ Church, Hurst Hill, Coseley. Nevertheless, I read on and was astonished to find included, within his records, the transcript of a Court of Enquiry, ordered by Lt Col R. Loraine, DSO, MC, the OC 14th Wing RFC, into his death, which occurred on Sunday 10 June 1917 on 6 Naval's aerodrome at Guizancourt (Flez).

Guizancourt can be found on Google Maps to the west of St Quentin, south of the A29 on the D15:

<https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Guizancourt,+80400+Quivi%C3%A8res,+France/@49.830189,3.0126502,2478m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x47e805e5a3b5e2c3:0xa0af1413268daf0!8m2!3d49.8301765!4d3.0214065>

According to the sketch plan lodged in the Court of Enquiry papers the aerodrome was adjacent to the railway line, near a Halt. The contemporary Map Reference is given as 62c V.27.d.6.8

As Guizancourt is such a small place the name does not appear until quite a high magnification is used, and then only when using 'Earth' rather than 'Map' view. The railway line has disappeared during the intervening years.

The Incident

The man, whose papers I was reading, was Driver T3/030520 Samuel Webster of the Auxiliary Horse Transport Company, Army Service Corps, which was attached to the 5th Cavalry Division, Fourth Army, BEF. A cabinet maker by trade, he lived at No. 33 Thames St, Princes Park, Liverpool and was 19 years of age when he volunteered on 3 December 1914.

As related in the report of the Court of Enquiry, Driver Webster, in company with Driver Walker, had been engaged in cutting the grass on Guizancourt aerodrome, with a horse-drawn mowing machine, for three days prior to the fateful day. In an adjacent field, a ground target had been placed so that the pilots of 6 Naval could practice firing their guns in flight; this simply constituted a white sheet placed on the ground. Practice firing had taken place during the previous days whilst the grass was being cut without incident. Grass cutting had briefly halted during the afternoon of 10 June, whilst Driver Walker was oiling the grass-cutting machine, when he heard the noise of an aeroplane and firing; Driver Webster fell at his feet, saying that he had been wounded.

The service papers of Driver Webster are available to view on a popular genealogical website, should it be desired to read further into this unlucky accident. It includes witness statements from Driver Walker ASC, Petty Officer A. Hatfield RNAS, Sick Berth Steward W.J. Robb RN, Lt G.G. MacLemman (6 Naval) and A1 J.H. James (6 Naval).

Court of Enquiry

Statements from witnesses to the event were taken the next day, and a Court of Enquiry was convened on the 12th, at the Headquarters of 6 Naval at Guizancourt. The President was Major A.G. Moore, MC (Manchester Regiment, attached

RFC and OC 24 Sqn RFC) and the Members were Lt F.J. Morse (King's Royal Rifle Corps, attached RFC) and 2Lt S.E. Raper (Seaforth Highlanders, attached RFC).

The first witness was Squadron Commander C.D. Breese, 6 Squadron, Royal Naval Air Service who stated:

At about 3.45 pm on No. 6 Squadron's (Naval) aerodrome on the 10th of JUNE 1917 I was watching Flt Sub Lt Holyman practising firing at the ground target placed in the field about a quarter of a mile South of the aerodrome. At the conclusion of one dive at an altitude of 700 feet I saw the machine flatten out very quickly and heard the bullets whistling across the aerodrome; almost immediately the firing ceased. I saw a man running towards the West side of the aerodrome. I went there at once and saw Driver Webster with a bullet wound in his side. I placed him on a stretcher and took him to a sick bay, at the same time sending a car to fetch the Medical Officer. When the MO arrived he dressed the wound and removed Driver Webster in an ambulance.

At the time of the accident the air near the ground was very bumpy. Driver Webster was working about a quarter of a mile from the ground target.

Driver Webster was taken to 39 Casualty Clearing Station at Tincourt, where he was operated upon. However, he succumbed to his injuries at 9.40pm that same day. He is buried in grave No. VII D 20 in Tincourt New British Cemetery; his gravestone bears the inscription *Till the day dawns and the shadows flee away.*

The unfortunate pilot at the controls of the aircraft was Flight Sub-Lieutenant Victor Holyman of Tasmania, Australia; he was Sopwith Camel N6359. He was an experienced pilot, who had joined 6 Naval on 27 May, and had previously served with 11 Naval and with 3 Wing. The third witness to be examined, he stated:

I took up a Sopwith 130 HP Camel to test the gun. I noticed there was no one in the vicinity of the ground target. At about 1,200 feet I dived at the target at about an angle of 45 degrees and at a speed of 70 knots; I aligned the Aldis sight on the mark and opened fire with both guns. At about 800 feet my machine struck a bump and the grass cutter on the aerodrome appeared in sight. I immediately ceased fire and descended. I found that Driver

6N Squadron's aerodrome, shown before Camels were received and with the unit's Nieuport 17bis lined up outside the hangars, behind which can be seen the railway siding that served the site. :CCI Archive

