

THE AIRMAN AND THE SPY

Claude Ridley and Victor Marié, 1916

by Peter Elliott

At the age of twenty Claude Ridley was the first RFC commander of 37 Squadron's B Flight, based at Stow Maries aerodrome in Essex – a site recently transformed into a museum to Great War aviation. I came to research Claude's story as he is the grandfather of a friend, Alain Ridley. Alain had collected a small archive that included Ridley's own remarkable report, covering his spy dropping mission in 1916, when he was stranded with an agent behind German lines. Another grandson of Claude, Nicholas Kitto, had also been intrigued by what he knew of his grandfather and had commissioned three paintings by the aviation artist Howard Gerrard, depicting episodes in his wartime career (and it is images of these paintings which illustrate this article). These added further enticing material to stimulate the research which has resulted in this account of Ridley's hair-raising couple of months in German-occupied France and Belgium that year.

QUEST TO SOLVE ESCAPE STORY MYSTERY

RIDLLEY'S STORY HAS BEEN MENTIONED briefly in books and journals a number of times, but, as early as 1920, a wholly mythological story emerged; one of Ridley having been abandoned by the French agent whom he had landed in occupied France and of his having to fend for himself, being helped on his way by civilians. A reading of Ridley's own report made it abundantly clear that this was a wonderful piece of fiction.¹ Ridley had relied entirely on, and had indeed been led out of danger by the spy whom he had dropped, whom he referred to only as V.M. in his report (and indeed all the local people were only referred to in his report by their initials; V.M.'s brother being referred to as M.M. – even though the report was to remain closed and secret for fifty years). In a recent account, Ridley's story was finally correctly summarised, but still the spy was not identified, and his side of the story lay hidden. Tantalisingly the author posed the question: What became of the brave, anonymous French officer? This is another of the many unsolved mysteries of the Great War.² It seemed to be a clear challenge and a mystery that was worth solving.

The initial V for a first name is rare in France, and so it was not too difficult to identify a man, bearing these initials, living at this time in the area of Northern France local to the story: Victor Marié. The next clue was then found in Ben Macintyre's book, *The Englishman's Daughter*.³ Macintyre tells the story of a group of British soldiers who were trapped behind enemy lines on the western front, during the early part of World War I, and sheltered by local families; but were finally betrayed to the Germans, and executed. In the book Macintyre also tells of the most important Allied spy network in the region, the 'Reseau Victor', run by Victor Marié and his brother, Marius, and operating from the same village of Villeret, in the Aisne (both names corresponded with the initials used in Ridley's report). So this provided what the lawyers would describe as *prima facie* evidence of the identity of Ridley's spy companion. What remained was to find chapter and verse on his story.

THE EARLY PART OF RIDLEY'S WAR: THE ACTION THAT BROUGHT DOWN ZEPPELIN L15 (AND OTHER NIGHT FLYING EXPERIENCES)⁴

In July/August 1915 Claude Ridley had started flying with 3 Squadron in France. James McCudden, who later became a leading fighter 'ace', happened to fly with Ridley on one



Ridley as a Captain in 1917, wearing his DSO and MC ribbons. :via author

occasion, and observed: *I did not enjoy it much for the pilot was one of the most dashing and enterprising kind. Such flying is all very fine for the pilot but not for the passenger, but this was not a serious reflection on Ridley's piloting skills.*⁵

On 5 September 1915 Ridley suffered a foot wound, during an air engagement above Lille, in Morane Type L 1863 with 2Lt C.T. Cleaver (uninjured) as his observer, but managed to return to his base with the machine badly shot up, and returned to England to recover.

He resumed active flying duty in the New Year with 10 Reserve Aeroplane Squadron at Joyce Green, but on the night of 31 January/1 February 1916, in darkness and mist, and with a defective altimeter, when he could see nothing at all below, he managed to wander 25 miles off course, and crashed at a point just above sea level near Reigate, his port wingtips striking the ground.⁶

On the night of 31 March/1 April 1916 a German Navy Zeppelin, L15, penetrated within twenty miles of Central London (this was the same Zeppelin that had bombed Central London on an earlier raid in October 1915, causing many casualties and a great deal of damage).⁷

Claude Ridley, by then with 19 Reserve Squadron, took off from Joyce Green and spotted the Zeppelin in the searchlights, well ahead of him and several thousand feet higher. He gave chase but was unable to gain sufficient altitude for an effective attack. However, he fired twenty hopeful rounds from his Lewis gun, at extreme range, before it disappeared out of the searchlight beams. Ridley patrolled for another two hours but saw nothing more. Brandon, a New Zealand airman and a member of the same unit, then also spotted the Zeppelin and positioned himself above the airship.

The Zeppelin received a direct hit from an anti-aircraft gun over Purfleet and then Brandon attacked it twice, dropping Ranken explosive darts, before losing his quarry. The airship had been mortally damaged, lost altitude and eventually ditched in the sea. Both Ridley and Brandon were awarded the Military Cross for their efforts that night.⁸

Ridley, although only nineteen years old in early 1916, was already an experienced pilot. He had been wounded in action, had survived the experience of crashing a machine, and had also had made a contribution to the downing of a Zeppelin. Crucially, he had already had valuable experience of night flying when he joined 60 Squadron at Gosport during May 1916: his first known flight with the unit being one of 30min