

WITNESS TO A 23 JANUARY 1917 COURT OF ENQUIRY

No.3 WING RNAS, LUXEUIL-les-BAINS, FRANCE

by Stewart TAYLOR

On 23rd January while returning from a raid one of M.H. Stephens' bombs, which he brought back, exploded. Two men were killed, Stephens very badly burned and Shearer stopped a piece with his left thigh. This reduces the original eight at Detling to three - Potter, Smith and myself - extract from diary kept by FSL G.R.S. Fleming.

BORN ON 11 JUNE 1892, NEAR ROMSEY, Hampshire, Maurice Hugh Stephens, along with his parents, emigrated to Canada in 1909 with the intention of producing fruit in Queenston, Ontario. The farming attempt proved futile, with the Stephens family moving to Toronto, while son Maurice found a job, a little further afield. He worked as a book-keeper with John Labatt Brewers of London, Ontario until accepted as a RNAS candidate by DNS, Ottawa on 8 May 1915. Maurice had begun training at the Toronto Curtiss School on 18 October 1915 and, with 22 minutes flying time, was included in the first group of 48 to 60 to go to England without a RAeC Certificate.

Appointed probationary FSL in Ottawa on 30 December 1915, Stephens sailed on the *Metagama* from Saint John, New Brunswick, on 1 January 1916. He would obtain his RAeC Certificate on 28 May 1916, at Chingford and then advance to Cranwell on 15 June. He was posted to 3 Wing RNAS at Manston on 15 August 1916 and went with that unit to France and its initial base at Luxeuil les Bains, that October 1916.

A rather timid pilot, FSL Stephens would require additional school time in the 1½ Strutter at Luxeuil until sent up to Ochey to commence war flying. Not until a frigidly cold Tuesday 23 January 1917 early afternoon would the aircraft, up to 32, attempt a raid on the Burbach blast furnaces. Only ten bombers would ultimately reach the objective, due to engine failures. There was great difficulty in starting the engines due to the temperature and this threw the four different flights into utter confusion. There were accidents to the machines while on the ground and another factor, played a negative role: the flights having recently been reorganised and having had little practice together found difficulty in picking up their respective positions in the

various formations. One of the last bomber pilots to leave Ochey was FSL Stephens, flying Sopwith 1½ Strutter N5121, coded 38 and belonging to A Flight 1 Squadron, and, like the other 9700 types, carried four 65lb ordnance. The cold was so intense that some of the escorting fighter aircraft crews were frost bitten. Having reached the target, FSL Stephens thought all his bombs were released. Not true. One still hung out of the rear left hand door. This was partially open.

After landing, N5121 had yet to be hangared. The English born pilot exited the cockpit and attempted to free the bomb, turning to one nearby air mechanic with the remark '*it would need a crowbar to shift it*'. With the yet unfused 65 pounder protruding to the ground and the engine restarted 'Steve' Stephens made ready to taxi N5121 into the A Flight, 1 Squadron hangar. The agitated pulsation from the 110hp Clerget was all that the bomb needed to drop; the engine vibration enough to loosen the single ordnance as it struck the frost covered soil. A blinding flash would have fatal consequences. A Board of Enquiry was set up on 25 January, with the highest ranking 3 Wing officers in attendance. All surviving witnesses were present. Attached, in its entirety are the questions asked and answers given.

FSL M.H. Stephens with Quirk at Luxeuil-les-Bains, October 1916.

:R. Kirkpatrick via S.K. Taylor



Seriously injured by the blast, FSL Stephens had to be taken by ambulance to Toul Hospital, then on to No 2 RC Hospital, Rouen and finally Haslar Hospital, England. Bomb splinters were removed from his left leg and burns to his face required immediate attention. Six weeks were needed to heal the injuries but, being the game little fellow he was, Steve Stephens, once discharged from hospital, made straight to Manston hoping to requalify as a pilot. His request turned down, Stephens would be given a very cushy job, one lasting until 19 March 1919. He would remain on the staff of Commander in Chief, the Nore, first under Admiral of the Fleet, Sir G.A. Callaghan and then Admiral Sir F.C.D. Sturdee where he served as an adviser.

With his burned face - the results had a masquerading effect on his post WWI life - Stephens came back to Canada in 1919 or 1920, settled in New Westminster, BC, with his left leg amputated six inches above the knee and his mobility severely hampered. Even with an artificial leg, he stayed very much close to home, doing