

AMERICAN EXPRESS? THAT'LL DO NICELY

NEWS OF 2LT L.A. COLBERT'S CAPTURE

based on material provided by Graham Pitchfork

The arrival of a War Office telegram to inform a family of the loss of a son must have been a traumatic moment. It would have been bad enough if the message informed of a death, but it was possibly worse when a person was posted as missing and the family had a lengthy wait before finding out the fate of their loved one – safe, wounded, dead or prisoner-of-war. The time lag between communications could be quite lengthy, but eventually a second War Office telegram would provide a family with further details. That situation was reversed in this instance, thanks to an arrangement agreed between the missing and his father.

2Lt Leonard Arthur Colbert was commissioned in the Highland Rifles and transferred to the RFC. After only four days at a School of Military Aeronautics, he joined 1 (Auxiliary) School of Aerial Gunnery on 6 June 1917 and was posted overseas less than four weeks later. Colbert joined 100 Squadron, flying FE2bs and BE2es on night-bombing missions; on 27 July, the date on which his classification as Flying Officer (Observer) came into effect – it didn't appear in the *London Gazette* until 14 August.

It wasn't until the night of 16/17 August that Colbert began operational flying. With Captain C.E. Blayney as his pilot, he flew two sorties to Courtrai. He was then paired up with 2Lt John Francis Bushe and flew all but one of his further missions with that pilot. Bushe, from Port of Spain, Trinidad BWI was one of two pilots with that surname in 100 Squadron at the time, the other being 2Lt Louis Alfred Bushe.

Throughout August and September, Colbert and Bushe flew a further 17 sorties with only one setback. They crashed FE2b B441 on 21 August, overrunning the flares on landing and crashing into a hedge, the damage being sufficient to warrant the machine's deletion by 2 AD three days later.

On the night of 30 September/1 October the pair were part of a 100 Squadron raid against the airship shed at Gontrode, a repeat of a raid the previous night. Their machine, FE2b A822, suffered engine failure after the FE2b was hit by AA fire and they were obliged to land. The pair burnt the machine before surrendering in a nearby village. Colbert described his time as a POW in his contribution to the classic *Annals of 100 Squadron* (p.170-173).

The dreaded telegram reached Colbert's parents in Seabrook Road, Liscard, Cheshire on 5 October, informing them that their son was missing but that this did not necessarily mean that he was wounded or killed.

This was followed by a handwritten note from his flight commander in 100 Squadron which read:

100 Squadron
RFC. BEF.
1/10/17

Dear Mr Colbert,

It is with great regret that I have to inform you that your son 2nd Lt L.A. Colbert went missing last night 30/9/17. He started on a bomb raid at 8pm with 2nd Lt J.F. Bushe a very experienced & good pilot. His father's address is

A.J.D. Bushe Esq.
Port of Spain,
Trinidad BWI.

Of course, it is quite possible he has landed safely on the other side as the weather conditions were exceptionally good & engine trouble may easily have let him down.

Your son was in my flight & I might say one of the most popular members. He was an exceptional character & always showed great courage during operations.

I should like to express my great sympathy in your loss & my loss of a great friend though I hope it may be only temporary.

I will of course inform you directly I receive any news of him.

Yours very sincerely,

J.A. Harman Capt

This was followed by a more official, typed letter from Colbert's CO, Major M.G. Christie, dated 17 October and expressing hope that the crew of A822 had suffered engine failure and landed safely to become POWs.

Colbert's father received news of his son in a letter dated 30 October 1917. It wasn't from the War Office or 100 Squadron but from American Express, their son's bank and signed by a J.W.D. Collins. It informed the father that a cheque of his son's had been cashed at Karlsruhe on 6 October.

This suggests that Leonard Colbert had gone into action prepared and armed with his chequebook. His nephew recounted that Colbert had explained a system agreed with his

