

THE AERIAL CRUSADER

PART 1

Guy Duncan Smith, via Ian Burns

*Great War memoirs from men serving in Egypt and Palestine are full of Biblical and Crusader references. It is clear that many of those involved felt deep down that they were part of a new Crusade. Whilst there is no evidence that Guy Duncan Smith held strong religious views, it is evident from the title of his memoir that he too was in thrall to the idea of a modern crusade. The story that follows is based on his memoir, **The Aerial Crusader, somewhat edited and placed in context.***

GUY DUNCAN SMITH was born on 21 October 1894 at West Dulwich, London. He was the youngest son of William Somervail Smith and Clara Annette Smith (née Beaumont). His older brother Harold Beaumont Smith was born three years earlier. The brothers had three sisters, Constance, Olive and Doris. William Smith was a currier and a partner in the firm Almond and Smith, providing leather goods to the British Army.

Guy was educated at the Dene Preparatory School in Caterham between 1902 and 1908. He spent a further year at Brightlands in Dulwich. His formal education ended in 1909 when his father retired from the leather business and the family emigrated to the USA, settling in Oakland, California. This may account for an discrepancy between Guy's Birth Certificate and grave stone which records a birth date of 1892. At this time the school leaving age in the UK was as early as 12 years, in California it was 16 years. As Guy was only 14 or 15 when he arrived in Oakland it is possible that his birth year was adjusted to avoid additional schooling.

Whilst the family home was in Oakland, William soon took an interest in the area around the Russian River to the north of the city. In 1911 he established a successful movie theatre in the town of Guerneville. Around 1915 William also purchased property in the redwoods along the Russian River at Rio Nido. He founded Rio Nido Incorporated and developed the area into a resort, which Guy would manage after the war.

In the summer of 1913 Guy signed up to join a surveying crew in the mountains along the Northern California coast. Whilst out in what was then largely unmapped wilderness, he developed typhoid after drinking water from almost dry creek beds. *Starting for my home in Guerneville, I made the distance in a state of near coma and fell from my horse's back at my father's door.* He was young and fit, but took some time to recover. Advised by his doctor to take a sea voyage to regain his strength, Guy decided to train as a wireless operator at the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America in San Francisco. Following the *Titanic* disaster the United States Ship Act of 1912 required ships carrying 50 or more people to have a wireless system and qualified operator. These were usually supplied by the Marconi Company. The job was no sinecure as the Marconi operator was often the sole operator aboard. Whilst trained to use and maintain the wireless, they could be unfamiliar with life at sea and often ran afoul the captain and his officers.

By late 1913 Guy was considered sufficiently trained to be sent to sea. It is probable for his early voyages that he understudied an experienced operator. *I made two or three trips in coastwise steamers; uneventful voyages which served, however, to restore me to good health. Finally, I was ordered to the Mazatlan...*

THE MAZATLAN INCIDENT

Prior to the war, to protect her interests and show the flag, Germany maintained a sizeable naval force, the East Asiatic

Squadron (*Ostasiengeschwader*) in the Pacific. Based on Tsingtao in north eastern China, it was built around two modern (1907) armoured cruisers SMS *Scharnhorst* and SMS *Gneisenau*. In addition, there were three efficient light cruisers SMS *Emden*, *Leipzig* and *Nürnberg*. Throughout 1914 one of these light cruisers was stationed on the west coast of Mexico protecting German interests during the ongoing revolution, in August 1914 the ship was *Leipzig*. All were coal burning ships. In times of peace they could refuel at many ports around the Pacific. When war commenced, most of these ports were closed to them. By international agreement whilst ports in neutral countries were open for a maximum of 24 hours, the quantity of coal supplied was frequently limited. But coal was the life blood of the cruisers. *Leipzig*, for example, had a bunker capacity of over 800 tons, but consumed almost 100 tons per day when cruising at 15 knots. This requirement doubled at 20 knots. Where, then, was this coal to come from?

Kaiserliches Oberkommando der Marine in Berlin devised the *Etappen* system. Put simply, this system was to provide a suitable number of freighters to supply coal, water and food to the warships. The freighters would stock up at friendly neutral ports and meet the warships at secluded anchorages, transfer their cargos and return for more. *Etappen* were set up in cities and ports throughout the world, including San Francisco which also looked after the Mexican port of Guaymas. The success of the scheme depended on reliable radio communication between freighter and warship.

The *Mazatlan* was built in 1903 by Laxevaag Maskin & Jernskibsbyggeri, in Bergen, Norway as the *SS Jason* and, until March 1914, sailed the oceans under the Norwegian flag. She was a typical three-island tramp steamer of the period, with a raised bow, midships and stern. The engines were installed in the midships section, along with passenger accommodation and the bridge. There were holds for bulk cargo forward and aft of the mid section. Her new owners Lloyd Mexicano, SA,

SS Mazatlan, at San Francisco during 1914. The radio shack can just be seen behind the open bridge; likewise the spreader bars for the aerial at the fore and main mast heads. :San Francisco Maritime NHP, B07.3,555p

