

Georges Guynemer



BY DAVID MÉCHIN

A legendary figure, Georges Guynemer personified the French combatant of the Great War. He was missing in action on 11 September 1917, in his youth and at the peak of his glory, and his marble statue, erected shortly afterward at the initiative of his father, has somewhat overshadowed the young man he really was. This is an attempt to discover what the real man was like, by bringing together all known pieces of the puzzle, from the oral testimony of his comrades and the few surviving archive documents.

An Upper Class Boy

Georges Marie Ludovic Jules Guynemer was born on 24 December 1894, in Paris, at 89 Rue de la Tour in the 16th District. His parents were both rich. His mother, Julie Doynel Naomi St Quentin, was the daughter of an earl, whose elder son was a senator. His father, Paul Guynemer, son of a former *sous-préfet*, was a former officer, trained at the military school of St-Cyr, who dreamt of military glory but one who resigned his commission after 10 years of service, disillusioned by the monotony of garrison life. Immediately after that resignation, he married and devoted his time to academic study, living on his comfortable family fortune. However, he had some regret over abandoning military life and ensured that his son received a rigorous education.

The rather frail young Georges spent his childhood in the castles of his paternal and maternal grandparents in Normandy. He was educated at home, as were his two sisters, Yvonne and Odette, by a private tutor, and then, at the age of nine years, attended school in Compiègne, to where his family had just moved. At twelve, Paul Guynemer sent his son to the Collège Stanislas in Paris, a private Catholic school with a military ethos, which he himself had attended, noted for its preparation for the Polytechnique and St Cyr competitive examinations.

One of his teachers, Father Chesnais, remembered the future ace as a pretty good, but turbulent, student, who won awards in arithmetic and Latin. Georges visited the Panhard factories in Ivry on Sundays, visits made possible by his friendship with Jean Krebs, whose father was a director. Mechanics then became his passion. Another of his friends, Jean Richard (later lieutenant in Escadrille N3), remembered that Georges was excited by the passage of an aeroplane over the college on 11 June 1911 and decided to visit an aerodrome.

He did this during the summer 1912, at Corbeaulieu, where there was the flying school founded by the aviators Robert Martinet and George Legagneux, and was offered a flight in a Farman III, piloted by the chief instructor, Lucien Melzassard.

His schooling was interrupted several times, by his poor health and, perhaps, also by a first exclusion for indiscipline, which would have been resolved by the discreet intervention of his paternal grandmother, a benefactor of the college. He graduated, presumably July 1913, and remained at Stanislas in a preparatory year for Polytechnic. A single incident ended his education; he slapped a teacher and was permanently excluded from the college. Paul Guynemer then wondered what to do with his son, who said that he wanted to become a pilot. His poor health prevented him from seeking employment, but he was cushioned by the family fortune. He was holidaying with the family at the seaside town of Anglet, near Biarritz, when WWI broke out.

Pilot by the Back Door

Like many young men of the time, raised in a traditional and *revancharde* education, the young Georges Guynemer spontaneously went to a recruiting office to volunteer for military service. Despite the intervention of his father, the military doctors thought him too skinny (with a height of 1.7 metres, he weighed only 50 kilograms) and sent him back home. He then consulted a doctor of Biarritz, M Loustalot, who tried to make him gain weight and muscle by prescribing sports sessions. By coincidence, another patient of this doctor was Paul Tarascon, an instructor at the Pau flying school. Loustalot spoke to Tarascon about this young man who yearned to become a military pilot. After meeting Guynemer in person, Tarascon pleaded his case with the school commandant, Captain Louis Bernard-Thierry, who eventually agreed to take the young man into auxiliary service, as an apprentice mechanic, on 21 November 1914.

The young *soldat de deuxième classe* (private second class) was assigned to various duties in the hangars at Pau. His first roommates, from underprivileged

backgrounds, mocked the upper class young man, who took his job very seriously. He impressed Captain Bernard-Thierry so much so that he supported a request from Guynemer, addressed to the Department of War on 23 December 1914, to become a student pilot. Thanks to his father's contacts among



Guynemer while at Lycée Stanislas: in 1911 the future ace wrote to his father, 'I know already how to calculate the effect of our bullets on German helmets'. A talented but turbulent student, he was excluded from the school while in preparatory year for Polytechnic that followed his graduation; the reason – slapping one of his teachers.

—SHD, Mortane collection