

R.E.8 PILOT

**Lieutenant
William Lefevre Oxley Parker
13 Squadron, RFC**

By John Barfoot



Born at Hatfield Priory in Essex on 2 February 1895, William was the youngest son of Christopher Parker D.L., J.P and his wife Helen, who took up residence at Faulkbourne Hall three years later. Faulkbourne Hall is still occupied by the Parker family today.

William one of five children in a well to do Essex family at the turn of the century would have been destined for a promising future had it not been for the Great War. 'Willie' as he was known to family and many friends, had been educated at Eton, followed by a year at Oriol College, Oxford prior to the outbreak of the Great War.

During his early days at Eton, Willie suffered a serious bout of influenza that affected his heart and confined him to bed for seven months. On his return to Eton in September 1910 still very weak, he was excused sports but such was his character and determination by September the following year, he had become House Captain of the cricket and football teams and by all accounts a very popular and well liked young man.

As a member of the Officer Training Corps at Oxford, Willie had been granted a commission in the Special Reserve less than two weeks before the outbreak of war. Orders arrived for him on Wednesday 5th August 1914 to report for duty with the 11th Hussars stationed at Aldershot.

Within the week John Oxley Parker, known as 'Jack' the elder brother of Willie also left the family home in Essex and served throughout the war with the Essex Yeomanry. Mention must be made of Flora Helen Oxley Parker the youngest of the three Parker sisters who served with the British Red Cross as a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment and later as a driver and Transport Officer with the Scottish Women's Hospital in Macedonia, for details of Flora and Jack Parker, you are recommended to read "*1914-18 A Village Remembers*" by Chris and Ken Adam, published by Faulkbourne Press 1999.

All too soon the training period for Willie came to end and his parents were at Victoria Railway Station to see him off to France via Folkestone on Monday 27th September 1915. The battle of Loos, a suburb of Lille where the BEF had made some progress after heavy fighting on the 26th, had just ended. The first duties of 2nd Lt W.L.O Parker in France, was supervising the salvage of equipment belonging to the Essex Yeomanry who were pulling out of the front line for a rest.

At this early period of the war, the 11th Hussars were over strength and in November Willie was sent back to the Regimental Depot in Rouen, but not for long. By January 1916 Willie found himself again back in the now frozen mud of the front line trenches. Hopes for leave to attend his brother Jack's wedding to Monica in March were dashed when the Regiment stood too and all leave cancelled due to the battle taking place in the French sector of the lines at Verdun.

As a keen horseman Willie's hopes were again raised during June, when the 11th Hussars were sent to the Somme as cavalry to exploit a gap to be forged in the enemy lines by an artillery

bombardment and infantry assault, but in the event the terrain proved impossible for cavalry, dismounted once more Willie found himself back in the trenches. During a heavy bombardment by the enemy of Bernafay Wood on Sunday 30th July, Willie was wounded and returned as a stretcher case to England.

It must have come something of a shock after two months of tender loving care in the London home of Lady Meynell turned in to a Military Hospital for officers, for Willie to return to barrack life at Aldershot in October 1916. Willie a very keen sportsman had taken little interest in aviation before the war started, but as did many more of the disillusioned cavalymen having experienced "the Wonders of No-Mans Land" Willie applied for a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps.

In February 1917, he was passed fit for active service and received orders to return to his Regiment, but just before his return to France, he was granted a transfer to the RFC and reported to No.1 School of Military Aeronautics at Reading. He commenced a course that involved what to Willie, were never ending days of aero engine maintenance, rigging, map reading, signalling and aerial and photographic reconnaissance.

It was not until April when Willie posted to 7 Reserve Squadron at Netheravon for flying instruction did he begin to feel at ease in an aircraft, at Reading an exasperated instructor had informed Willie in no uncertain terms that he would not make a good pilot, as his hands were too heavy on the controls. The flying instructors at 7RS proved the previous instructor wrong, heavy handed or not they had Willie flying solo for the 5 hours necessary to qualify for his wings.

Training then began on more advanced machines when posted to the Central Flying School at Upavon. On Tuesday 24th July Willie caught the train to London and reported for orders at the Royal Flying Corps Headquarters at the Hotel Cecil in the Strand.

The following morning his parents were again at Victoria Station to see their son off to war, this time at the early hour of half past seven. Such are the ironies of war, that as Willie sailed from Folkestone to Boulogne he passed the boat carrying his brother Jack home to England on leave.

Once again in France, Willie made his way to Amiens and stayed overnight at the Officers Club, before proceeding to the pilots pool at No.2 Aeroplane Depot at Candas awaiting a posting to a front line squadron. Having spent a comfortable five nights in spite of very wet weather under canvas, his posting arrived on the morning of Tuesday 31st July, followed some hours later by a Crossley Tender to transport him to Etrun aerodrome two miles from Arras, home to No.13 Squadron.

Willie found his squadron had served in France since October 1915 engaged on artillery observation and photographic reconnaissance. It had been equipped with a variety of Royal Aircraft Factory designed BE2 machines until the end of April 1917, when they began to exchange the venerable and vulnerable BE2 for the also RAF designed RE8, a machine that was destined to take second place to the Sopwith Camel for losses by type during the war. As part of the III Brigade RFC in support of the Third Army during the Battle of Arras, which began on Wednesday 4th April 1917, No.13 Squadron had suffered the loss of 14 aircraft by the end of the month.

During May the Squadron suffered the loss of another BE2c on the 7th, this was also the day the RFC lost their leading scout (fighter) pilot, Capt Albert Ball VC of No.56 Squadron killed in action. Albert Ball with 44 confirmed victories, had received his baptism of fire flying a BE Corps machine with 13 Squadron back in February 1916. No.13 Squadron then moved from Savy where it had been based since March 1916 to Etrun a mile or so NW of Arras, it was here on the last day of July 1917 that Willie reported for duty as a replacement pilot.

The following morning Wednesday 1st August after a briefing as a new member of 'A' Flight he collected maps to familiarise himself with the area of the Front patrolled by 13 Squadron where he would have to return to the shooting war. It rained all morning, during the afternoon it turned to drizzle so Willie made himself familiar with the layout of the aerodrome. Bridge was a popular pastime in the Mess and as heavy rain returned that evening Willie had the opportunity to get to know his new comrades.

It was still raining the next morning when Willie having no specific duty for the day went with a Tender to sample the delights of St.Omer. Returning to Etrun well after midnight he found a cheery party going full blast in 'C' Flight Mess. It was a relaxed atmosphere in 13 Squadron at this period, in fact Willie did not meet his Commanding Officer Major Garrod who had recently arrived from 12 Squadron as a replacement for Major Powell a family friend who had requested Willie's posting to the squadron until Sunday evening 5th August. During the day Willie had visited the HQ of various Siege Batteries he would be ranging for on 'Art Obs' in the near future.

Another "*Dud day*" on 6th August may have washed out flying, but not the Squadron sports and dinner that evening. Willie in his element, ran in the Officers 100yds, joined in the Officers versus Sergeants tug of war event and entered a local RA battery horse race, riding bare back around the aerodrome. After dinner an excellent band gave a concert in a hangar, Willie recorded the event as "*a most enjoyable evening*", although a newcomer to the Squadron he was becoming very popular and soon elected Mess President.

Willie paid another visit to 113 and 241 Siege Batteries on 7th August with a wireless Sergeant who pointed out several things he had not been made aware of on his previous visit. During the afternoon Willie made his first flight in France, all be it as a passenger in a 'Harry Tate' flown by Lt T. Q. Back, during which he saw the famous town of Arras from the air for the first time

Returning to Etrun, the 'new boy' attempted a solo flight with sandbags in the rear cockpit of the 'Harry Tate' to compensate for the weight of an observer, unfortunately a tyre burst on take off and he bent an undercarriage V strut with a heavy landing.

That evening details of an artillery shoot planned for the next day were explained to 'A' Flight by the C.O. Fortunately for Willie, low clouds the next morning prevented the show taking place. That gave him the opportunity to master landing an RE8 with a full war load and 'Pte Sandbags' as passenger. After lunch with Lt Fletcher instead of 'Pte Sandbags' Willie made his first war flight, taking off from Etrun at 1300hrs for a weather patrol sending back wireless reports with the Morse key.

Disappointed at being left out of the artillery shoot that took place on Thursday 9th August, Willie walked into Etrun, RFC Communiqués for the day reported "*43 targets were successfully engaged from aeroplane observation*" On the Flight notice board that evening Willie saw he was detailed for a patrol the following morning with Lt W.L. Yorath.

Taking off with Yorath at 0805hrs in RE8 A3851, on their return at 0950hrs Willie felt very unwell and made his way to a near by Casualty Clearing Station and saw a Medical Officer for medication, on returning to the aerodrome he went to bed. When he got up for dinner that evening he felt slightly better.

Saturday 11th August Willie made the acquaintance of 'Archie' (anti- aircraft fire) for the first time, he had woken that morning feeling much better and by the time the cloud cover had lifted in the afternoon he was ready for his first shoot over the lines, but was driven back after an hour by 'Archie' fire. Making a second attempt at 1730hrs with Lt Westbury they carried out two shoots. Willie noted "*Hundreds of our machines of all types. No Huns at all.*"

After attending Church Service held in a hangar on Sunday morning 12th August, Willie had lunch and returned to the war, taking off with Lt Austin in A3729 at 1530hrs they carried out "*a slow but fairly successful shoot*" with 158 Siege Battery. Later as it was a fine evening Willie walked over to Wagonlieu aerodrome, home to No.12 Squadron who were also equipped with 'Harry Tates' engaged in army co-operation.

Monday 13th August Willie carried out a morning patrol with Lt Davis in A3729, there was little to report on their return due to the weather. During the afternoon he took his rigger AM Alston for a spin in A3729, but found the old 'Bus' would only spiral! The RE8 had a reputation of shedding its extensions (the over lapping sections of the upper wing) when mild aerobatics were performed.

Willie received an invitation to have dinner with No.35 Squadron that evening from an old Eton and 11th Hussar chum. 2nd Lt Arthur Randolph Wormeley Curtis had flown as an observer with 35 Squadron for the previous six months. After dinner in the Officers Mess, Willie and Curtis played

Bridge with Capt Cyril Swire also an ex-cavalry man and the CO of the Squadron Major Alwyn Holt. Willie in his diary made no mention of the Armstrong Whitworth FK8 machines flown and highly regarded by the pilots of 35 Squadron, by the same token he made no criticism of the RE8 machines of 13 Squadron. On his return by the ubiquitous Crossley Tender to his aerodrome at Etrun five miles away, Willie found yet another wild party in full swing, this time for three observers returning home to Blighty the next morning for pilot training, with hangovers no doubt.

Three weeks had now passed since had Willie returned to France after being wounded in July 1916, he knew the life he enjoyed as a pilot officer in the RFC also had its share of danger, but it was a far more civilised form of warfare than his experience as a cavalryman in the trenches and he intended to make the most of it.



William Parker in an informal pose. Note the hand in pocket and flying cap.

On Tuesday 14th August, he spent the morning visiting 251 Siege and 20th RMA and carried out a disappointing 'Art Obs' during the afternoon in A3729 with Lt Westbury as observer, the Batteries were shooting badly, finally he gave up and landed with just minutes to spare before a bad thunderstorm broke showering the aerodrome with large hail stones.

The following day another shoot in A3729 with Yorath as observer was followed by an evening at the 'Pictures' in HQ hanger.

So far in spite of efforts made by Willie in visiting the Siege Batteries to explain the clock face method of directing fire to the gunners, he had little success in practise, the poor weather conditions that August had not helped, but Willie was not the type of young man to be complacent in the face of a challenge.

A two hour and fifty minute shoot on the 16th August with the 10th RMA again flying A3729 enabled Willie to practice range a few rounds before handing over the shoot to his experienced observer Lt Dykes.

On Friday 17th August Willie noted in his diary "*First decent morning since my arrival*" with his old confidence returning, he visited 256 Siege Battery and the 10th RMA to finalise details for a combined shoot that evening. Taking off in A3729 at 1717hrs with Lt Westbury as observer, Willie recorded "*visibility wonderful*" and allowed Westbury to carry out both shoots. Landing at Etrun at 2005hrs, they were in time for a farewell dinner laid on for Capt Back who was returning to home establishment.

Saturday 18th August was a notable day for Willie who recorded "*Did first pucker shoot with 256 Siege. Battery shot well*", he was learning the art of 'Art Obs' in an most leisurely manner. RE8 A3729 became Willie's regular 'Bus' and flying with Lt Yorath as observer for a few days, Willie had become a part of the squadron. A two hour patrol with Yorath that began at 0800hrs the next morning was hampered by low clouds. During the afternoon Willie tinkered with his 'Bus' fitting a map holder and other gadgets his Flight members had found useful. After dinner he walked in the open countryside that reminded him of the rural Essex he loved.

It was business as usual for Willie and Yorath with a patrol on the evening of Monday 20th the next morning the 'old firm' did a shoot for 139 Siege Battery, Willie had to hand the shoot over to Yorath as the target was difficult for the pilot to see as conditions were very bumpy and low clouds forced Willie to fly beneath them and take evasive action from small arms fire.



A Siege Battery of 8-inch Howitzers in action on the Western Front. IWM Q5817

Willie wrote home to his parents every day when possible, on Wednesday 22nd August, because his patrol had been washed out, he was able to get a lift on a Crossley Tender bound for St. Omer to collect a new pilot, they dropped Willie off on route at Berghette where his brother Jack and the Essex Yeomanry were stationed, he recorded "*Jack, horses [the love of his life] & men looked well and smart. Had an excellent evening*"

Before setting out on a shoot on the morning of the 23rd, Willie found time to take Sergeant Wing his mechanic for a 'flip' as an engine test for ten minutes. Then with Yorath he took off again at 1035hrs and carried out a 'fairly successful' shoot with 137 Siege Battery before landing A3729 back at Etrun at 1310hrs and be invited to tea that evening by the CO of 137 Battery.

Air Mechanic Arthur Wardlaw was Willie's observer for a 'Dawn Patrol' on Sunday 26th leaving at 0520hrs in A3729, returning at 0810hrs. In his diary Willie praised the young airman as being "*excellent at recognising Huns and does not worry one*". During the afternoon Willie superintended the start of an overhaul of A3729. This reliable RE8 was one of a batch of 150 built by the Siddeley-Deasy Motor Car Company during 1917.

Another storm that evening was followed by severe gales the following day that increased with ferocity during Monday night to demolish a hanger, fortunately not the maintenance hanger that housed Willie's 'Bus' and ripping the roof off several huts.

Rain and squalls also washed out flying for August 29th, but Willie made the best of things with dinner and a "*Cheery evening*" in the Officers Club, Arras.

A re-rigged and serviced A3729 was wheeled out of the hanger on the morning of Thursday 30th August and after a minor adjustment or two, Willie accompanied by Sgt Spencer took to the air for an hour long engine and airframe test, returning at 1055hrs to give the old 'Bus' the thumbs up. Willie then made his way to a field where 28 Kite Balloon Section were holding a Sports Day, to meet up with Lt George Pape and talk about their good old days at Eton before the war, during which they watched "*good boxing*". Returning to the aerodrome Willie made A3729 ready for an artillery shoot with 113 Siege Battery, taking off at 1800hrs with Lt Fletcher as observer. Landing

back at Etrun two and a quarter hours later, Willie found a car waiting to take him to dine with the officers of 113 Siege Battery and later noted in his diary "*good evening*".

The last day of August 1917 saw low clouds and rain interfere with the work of the army co-operation squadrons along the Western Front. Behind the lines at Etrun, Willie after a brief and bumpy flight to test the 'Harry Tates' rigging and give air mechanic Scott a flip so the young rigger would have something to write home about, Willie stood by for a shoot and "*kicked about*" to pass the time.

Fortunately Willie had an early morning shoot on Saturday 1st September, leaving Etrun at 0500hrs with Lt Dykes, they took turns in directing the fall of shells for a howitzer battery before returning at 0820hrs and for Willie the real business of the day. Willie had laid on a squadron Tender for a trip to the Cavalry Corps show at Pronay, it would attract not only Field-Marshal Douglas Haig, Prince Arthur of Connaught and the Generals Staff, but many of Willie's cavalry comrades and ex-tutors and students from his days at Eton and again the love of his life hundreds of horses.

An evening shoot with Lt Westley on 2nd September allowed Willie time to recover from the previous evening's many reunions. Take off at 1845hrs Westley ranged the guns until failing light brought them back to Etrun at 2000hrs. AM Harold Postons flew as Willie's observer in A3729 for the first time on Monday 3rd September, during the three hour shoot, Willie ranged the batteries while the young mechanic kept a wary eye open for enemy aeroplanes.

The next two days Willie carried out shoots for 158 Siege Battery, first with AM Perkins and again with AM Postons. The next day a very confident Willie ranged the guns for 241 Siege Battery with Lt Austin acting as observer. The guns had been wrongly laid, but after correction from Willie the shoot went well. Willie had a day off on the 7th, not being the type to put his feet up and read, he made for Albert via No.12 Squadron at Courcelles le Comte, who had re-equipped with 'Harry Tates' during August. On his return to Etrun he was put on standby to practice night landings that were later cancelled.

It was on the 8th September that Willie received the news his brother Jack a Captain in the Essex Yeomanry had been wounded six days earlier, Willie wrote to his parents "*Bad luck he [Jack] did not get a draught home*".

Heavy ground mist having cancelled his patrol enabled Willie to take part in an impromptu Officers versus Sergeants football match. 'Dud' weather "*hot but misty*" kept Willie grounded all day on the 9th. A shoot with AM Postons on Monday evening 10th September had to be washed out after half an hour in the air due to engine trouble with A3729.

Engine trouble again dogged Willie and AM Postons the following evening when the engine of A4379, not Willie's usual 'Bus' cut out over Monchy, "*Just got into aerodrome*" recorded Willie in his diary. The 21st Division Gymkhana he attended was also disappointing "*jumping poor*" and to round his day off he recorded "*Elizabeth Neale engaged*". Having a shoot cancelled during the morning of Wednesday 12th enabled Willie to attend No.5 Squadron sports day that had amusing side-shows between the usual events.

September 13th he carried out an early morning patrol, not recorded in Squadron records, this could have been due to his machine returning within the hour due to bad weather. Still grounded by the elements the following morning, Willie set about renovating the outside of his recently acquired hut on the aerodrome and had just finished painting the roof during the afternoon as an orderly arrived, a shoot with 113SB required his attention. Airborne at 1825hrs with AM Postons in A3729, Willie recorded "*Weather hopeless, most unsatisfactory.*" Returning to the aerodrome at 1950hrs enabled Willie to attend an evening concert staged by the personnel of 3 AAP.

The following pages of Willie's diary remain blank until Thursday 20th, No.13 Squadron records however, indicate that he carried out a three hour shoot with AM Postons in A3729 during the afternoon of the 15th. Changing to A4739 with Lt Heaton as his observer Willie carried out another three hour shoot on the afternoon of Tuesday 18th.

On the 19th teamed with his regular observer AM Postons in A4739, Willie took off at 1015hrs for a shoot with 251SB, returning at 1120hrs after recall by a visual ground signal. The Sterling sets then in use by Corps squadrons were only transmitters, for receiving messages the airmen had to rely on the Ingram 'Strip Method' (large white canvas panels laid out by the gunners) for orders. As half an hour later Willie and Postons were in the air again and completed a successful two hour shoot with 251SB in the same machine, this suggests that the gunners had dealt with a problem and phoned 13 Squadron to continue with the shoot.

A3264, carrying out a shoot after Willie and Postons had returned safely, was badly shot up by enemy fighters. Lt Evans crash landed the 'Harry Tate' back on the aerodrome when his observer Lt Gray received leg injuries.

A 1000hrs shoot on the 20th, with Sgt Heaton aboard A3729 was washed out after 30 minutes due to very low cloud. On their return Willie tested A3279's forward firing Vickers machine gun at the Butts, no doubt with the lucky escape the previous day of the crew of A3264 on his mind. The last casualty due to enemy aircraft had been Capt Greenslade wounded on 22nd July, nine days before Willie reported for duty with No.13 Squadron.



A fine study of a 59 Squadron RE8 crew crossing the lines, taken from an accompanying aircraft.

Friday 21st September Willie carried out a shoot on Hamblain, ranging for 184SB in A3729 with AM Postons again keeping a wary eye open for 'Huns' That evening Willie attended an "excellent concert by *The Anchor Follies*" the RNAS were no doubt responsible for this entertainment. Next day a counter battery "strafe" arranged with 184SB, involving six 'Harry Tates' of 13 Squadron including Willie and Poston in A3279, failed as the "Bosch did not retaliate" not wanting to give their camouflaged emplacements away to the 'eyes in the sky'

A day off on the 23rd enabled Willie to continue decorating his hut. He was however ordered to carry out a shoot with 251SB that same evening. Taking off at 1755hrs in A3279, Willie and Postons found their mission impossible due to poor visibility.

Monday 24th was an uninterrupted day off for Willie who with two fellow officers set out for the delights of Boulogne, "*Gorgeous day, sea looked lovely*" On returning Etrun they entered the Mess for dinner where they were informed six replacement observers had arrived during the day.

Both Willie and Postons escaped injury in a crash landing on the 25th, when A3279 again returned early from a shoot after a large white cloth Ingram T had been displayed by the gunners ordering their return to the aerodrome. After lunch Willie supervised the repairs carried out on his 'Bus'. On standby for a shoot the next day Willie regrettably was unable to accompany the squadron Tender bound for a few hours in Amiens, instead he carried out some more work on the hut.

Thursday 27th as A3279 was still out of action following the landing mishap, Willie and Lt Carter in A4379 carried out three and a quarter hour shoot on Hamblain. Highlight of the day for Willie, he was able to sleep in the hut that he had been renovating for the first time, in spite of some of 13 Squadron 'Harry Tates' carrying out night bombing flights. Next morning with AM Postons in the observer's cockpit of A4379 Willie took to the air at 0610hrs, carried out an uneventful line patrol. Returning to Etrun aerodrome at 0825 Willie found his name down for practice night landings that evening.

Willie took A4731 into the air with 'Pte Sandbags' as ballast at 2150hrs, but touching down along the flare path fifteen minutes later he misjudged the height damaging the centre section of the biplane with a bumpy landing. His trusty A3729 was pushed out of the hanger for him and within twenty minutes he was airborne again with 'Pte Sand bags' to make a perfect night landing at 2223hrs.

Willie carried out his first bombing raid the next night, with Lt Webb as observer in A4317 loaded with six 25lb Cooper HE bombs, their target Oisyleverger. Willie's diary states "Gorgeous night. Found way easily by moon" Returning to the welcoming flare path at Etrun, the 'Harry Tate' landed at 2315hrs having been airborne for well over three hours.

The last day of September 1917 was ideal weather for photographic reconnaissance to be carried out, 13 Squadron sent A3731 off on a mission at 1050hrs. Front line troops reported a Corps machine falling in flames half an hour later. Fears were confirmed when Sgt pilot Albert Stanley and AM Arthur Wardlaw failed to return to Etrun.

Thanks to the very good visibility, during the evening Willie and AM Postons on board A4317 carried out a successful shoot with 184SB, returning to the aerodrome at 1905hrs, Willie noted in spite of the gorgeous weather during the day the nights were turning cold.

Monday 1st October was another glorious day for Willie, apart from a short test flight in his favourite 'Harry Tate' A3729 with AM Wilson lasting all of ten minutes until Willie landed the machine with a broken fin. That evening he dined at the Musketry School as guest of the Commandant another old friend from pre-war days. Returning to the aerodrome he attended a concert by 'The Empties' in a hanger, Willie's observation of the show "Pretty Thick"!

Willie returned to the war the following afternoon with a three hour line patrol in A4379 accompanied by Lt Colman acting as observer. Wednesday 3rd grounded by the weather during the morning Willie borrowed a horse from his friend the Musketry School Commandant and was once again in his element. A visit to 48 and 251 Siege Batteries in the afternoon rounded off the day nicely.

Strong winds on the 4th kept Willie grounded, with time on his hands he planned a garden around his recently decorated hut, but rain all afternoon and evening prevented work on the project. AM Wilson again had something to write home about the next day, when he accompanied Willie into the air to test the repaired A3729 for ten minutes during the evening. Earlier members of 13 Squadron including Willie had played the nearby Musketry School football.

Rain until mid afternoon on Saturday 6th enabled Willie to play rugger for 10 Kite Balloon Section against 5th Lancers. "Jolly cold, good game, a draw" records Willie who spent an "Excellent evening" dining with the Lancers- "returned to Squadron at 3 am. Fearfully cold drive." South easterly squalls on the 7th kept Willie grounded, during the day he found himself elected Mess President. This important post had perks as Willie's entry in his diary for Wednesday 10th reads, "Wet day. Went to Amiens for mess staff & 'fizz' for the rugger 'beano'. Lunched at Doullen, spent an enormous amount of money in Amiens. Dined at Godberts, Tender piled high on return." Willie's modest diary made no reference to a shoot carried out with Lt Carter in A3729 the evening before.

Willie's first raid as Mess President on Amiens had been in preparation for the following day for a "Return ruggar match v 5th Lancers, we just won 6-5. Lancers stayed to dinner. Great evening." A casual reader of the 21st century Looking at this account of Lt Parker of the Royal Flying Corps in 1917, may get the impression Willie led a gentleman's life in uniform, compared with the lot of so many young men of his generation existing in the squalid hell of the trenches and he did. It must be remembered however Willie although a cavalry officer, had served in the trenches and survived being severely wounded. He was also aware of his chances of survival flying RE8 Corps machines and accordingly he made the most of his life, which unfortunately like so many of his young friends would be a short one.

Willie had played ruggar and enjoyed a social evening on the 11th, but his diary made no mention of the two hour fifty minute Artillery Patrol carried out with Lt Casswell in A3729 returning at 1310hrs well in time for the kick-off.

An early morning AP with Lt Colman in A3729 enabled Willie to take part in an officer's versus men ruggar match on Saturday 13th it was the 2nd anniversary of 13 Squadron arriving in France. To mark the occasion 12 Squadron sent a Concert party over for the evening. Although suffering from boils on the 15th, Willie again played ruggar for 13 Squadron against the ASC. "Rough side, squadron beaten."

Photographic reconnaissance over the enemy lines was arguably the most dangerous of the daily tasks carried out by Corps squadrons, by the virtue of the straight flight path required to take overlapping mosaic photo's, such a mission would eventually claim the life of Willie and his observer, but not on Tuesday 16th, taking off in A3827 with Lt Steel at 1010hrs Willie returned to Etrun at 1120 having completed the mission. His entry in diary for the day "Dined with Pawson & Musketry School."

Willie was back in his favourite 'Bus' A3729 when with Lt Carlin they carried out a successful shoot with 135SB on the 17th October, however an attempted AP with Lt Webb in A3729 on the 19th was a 'washout' due to hazy conditions. The next three days passed with the round of social engagements the very popular Willie enjoyed, dining with fellow officers from nearby squadrons and regiments, he did suffer a "very bad concert" after dining with the Household Battalion on one occasion.

AM Harold Postons again kept a wary eye open for enemy aircraft as Willie ranged the guns of 239 SB in A3729 on the 24th, returning to the aerodrome at 1040hrs. Willie continued the shoot for two and a half hours with 239 SB after lunch, having changed machines to A3827 with Lt Coleman as observer. To round the day off Willie enjoyed a "very good concert" presented by the 4th Division "follies" at a nearby CCS.

Friday 26th although a "very wet day" having ran in a paper chase during the afternoon, the day brightened up when Willie attended a concert staged by the 45th Divisional "troupe" in a hanger on the aerodrome. "Best show I have ever seen in France. Capitol evening."

It was business as usual the next morning for Willie, leaving at 0930hrs in A3729 with Lt Carter who carried out the shoot with 239 SB, returning at 1240hrs. "Very slow" reads Willie's diary. Sadly the 27th October page contains the last entry by the young airman.

Teamed once again with AM Postons in A3729 on the 28th Willie took off on patrol at 0555hrs but returned ten minutes later due to low clouds. Fifteen minutes later as the ceiling began to lift they were back in the air to continue the patrol.

A shoot for 184SB by Willie and Postons in A3729 on the 29th had to be washed out after twenty minutes in the air due to the appalling weather. By comparison with so many the airman serving on both sides of the lines during the summer of 1917, Lt Parker as a Corps pilot fared very well on and off duty. With a good observer such as AM Postons to give ample warning of enemy aircraft, it had been prudent for Willie to cease Art-Obs and return to the comparative safety behind allied lines until the threat had passed. Unlike Art-Obs, photo reconnaissance had to be carried out over the enemy lines.

Squadron archives do not record what Willie did on Tuesday 30th October, what ever it was he had been too busy to bring his diary up to date. Looking forward to going home on leave in the middle of November, that evening Willie may have relaxed in the comfort of his recently decorated hut on the aerodrome, writing letters to loved ones and friends he was looking forward to seeing whilst on leave in Essex.

Willie was not the only airman in France looking forward to going home on leave during November, Hans Bethge's 18 months as a front line pilot was effecting his nerves, leave in Berlin with his family was less than two weeks away, and it could not come soon enough. Willie and Hans were destined to meet the next day and only one would catch the leave train for home.

Obltn Hans Bethge had taken command of The Royal Prussian Jagdstaffel Nr.30 the previous January; he was a competent leader and added steadily to his previous three confirmed victories. As the months went by however the edge of the two gun Albatros machines flown by the Jasta had eroded, many of the RFC scouts encountered in the autumn of 1917 were as good if not better than the latest Albatros V strutter.

Wednesday 31st October was just another day to Willie, a photo reconnaissance for XVII Corps HQ in the morning to be carried out. Rain the previous day had given way to misty conditions that had cleared when Willie with AM Postons set out for the lines at 0940hrs.

Their 'Harry Tate' A3827 carried a metal Type L semi-automatic camera loaded with a wooden magazine housing eighteen 5 x 4 inch plates. This camera powered by a small windmill, in a machine flying dead straight at 50mph between 6 and 8,000ft was capable of taking overlapping photographs at 10 second intervals.

The last 13 Squadron loss due to enemy action had taken place during a similar photo-reconnaissance on 30th September. All went well, mission completed under the vigilant eyes of his observer, Willie wasted no time in re-crossing the lines and landed back at Etrun aerodrome at 1115hrs.

What happened next was to have fatal consequences, unloading the magazine of exposed photographic plates, Postons no doubt cold and stiff after an hour and a half in an open cockpit at 6,000ft, may have been responsible for them being accidentally dropped and ruined.



Lt William L.O. Parker C.W.O. Parker

The mishap was serious. Willie without hesitation ordered the RE8 to be refuelled and camera reloaded, and just ten minutes later Willie and his observer, set out for the second time that morning, aware that Germans fighters had no doubt been informed of their previous interest in Biache St Vaast and may still be in the area.

During his three months as a pilot at the front, Willie had done well to avoid enemy aircraft. Artillery Observation just over the lines with sharp eyed observers had kept him out of trouble up till now. Eye witness accounts of Willie's and Poston's fight with enemy scouts vary as to the number of enemy aircraft involved, but agree the "Harry Tate" crew put up a gallant fight.

Returning to Jasta 30 airfield at Phalempin, Obltn Bethge putting on a brave face, needed help and a pair of wooded steps to climb out of the cockpit of his machine. He submitted a claim for an RE artillery flyer shot down over Plouvain at 1310hrs, (1210 British time) Willie and his observer had

been airborne forty five minutes. As the English flyer had fallen inside German lines confirmation of Hans Bethge's 18th victory was soon forth coming.



Oberleutnant Hans Bethge commanded Jasta 30; although he was credited with downing 20 British aircraft, his nomination for the prestigious Pour le Merite had not been approved at the time of his death.

The fine old chateau that served as HQ for Jasta 30 also provided comfortable living quarters for the commanding officer. Alone that evening in his quarters a dutiful son wrote a letter to his mother at home in Berlin, confiding that his nerves were "unhinged" and he felt "defeated and ill" he continued "It is owing to a tremendous and obstinate air fight that I had today with an English R.F.C I finally conquered him and he fell into the German lines." Jasta 30 records show Obltn Bethge made just the one victory claim during October 1917, the obstinate opponents in his letter were Willie and Harold Postons.

In the wake of the dreaded War Office telegram informing Mr and Mrs Parker their son was missing, came letters from Willie's many friends and comrades in arms offering sympathy and hope that their son was still alive.

Willie's C.O, Major Garrod wrote a kind letter of condolence to the Parker family, but warned them to expect the worst. "I fear that there can be little hope of him still being alive". Many letters however continued to arrive giving hope of Willie's survival, until December when Lt William Parker was officially listed as killed in action.

Returning from leave on 10th December Oblt Bethge brought his total of British aeroplanes shot down to twenty and a nomination for the Pour le Merite before he was killed in action on 17th March 1918. The body of Hans Bethge was returned to his family in Berlin for burial with full military honours. Unlike the British Victoria Cross, the Prussian Pour le Merite was not awarded posthumously.

The grief of the Parker family was further aggravated by their son having no known grave. Mrs Helen Parker carried out extensive enquiries to find the resting place of her son without success until as late as 1924. It is possible that Willie's sister Flora, who had been working for the French Wounded Emergency Fund at Peronne in the post war summer of 1919, found what remained of the RE8 flown by Willie. The only identification number on the wreckage found by his sister was a sub contractors number on a piece of wing tip fabric, unfortunately the Air Ministry were unable to identify even the type of machine from this. Flora was prevented from searching the remains of Plouvain Cemetery as it had been destroyed in a bombardment during the war.

Time is a great healer; however fate had more tragedy in store for the Parker family with the tragic loss of their youngest daughter Flora eight years after the Armistice. Having survived three and a half years nursing on the French and Serbian war fronts, Flora died in a civil airline accident, it was her first flight in an aeroplane and unfortunately her last.

Returning from a continental holiday with a companion on Saturday 2nd October 1926 in a French Air Union Bleriot type 135 on a scheduled flight from Paris to Croydon, Flora was one of five passengers and crew of two killed when the pilot attempted to make an emergency landing at Penshurst with port engines on fire, losing control at 500ft the Bleriot dived into the ground, all on board lost their lives in the crash.

The funeral of Flora Helen Oxley Parker, took place at Faulkbourne Church on Friday 8th October 1926. Inside Faulkbourne Church is a splendid memorial tablet and a stained glass window dedicated to the memory of her brother Willy who, like so many of his generation, has no known grave.



Left: Flora Helen Oxley Parker, who served three and a half years with the British Red Cross in France, Salonika and Serbia. After the Armistice, Flora searched in vain for the grave of her brother William. C.W.O. Parker

Below: A French Air Union Bleriot 135 four Salmson radial engined aircraft the type in which the unfortunate Flora, four fellow passengers and two crew members perished on a scheduled flight from Paris to Croydon in 1926. D. Wood



The names of Air Mechanic Harold Leigh Postons from Birmingham and Lieutenant William Leferve Oxley Parker are recorded on the stone panels of the Arras Flying Services Memorial in the Faubourg-d'Amiens Cemetery, dedicated to airmen of the British Empire that were killed in air operations above the Western Front during the 'war to end all wars' and have no known grave.

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