

Sad Fate of Lieutenant Desmond Arthur

Written by Liam Dodd

Tuesday, 02 March 2010 09:48 - Last Updated Tuesday, 02 March 2010 09:50

Army Aviator Killed - Irish Officer Falls 2,000 Feet

The first accident since the formation of the aviation base at Montrose occurred on Tuesday morning. A number of officers were engaged in reconnaissance flights under satisfactory weather conditions when one of them, Lieutenant Desmond L. Arthur of the Munster Fusiliers, met with his death. He was piloting a biplane when at a height of 2,000 feet the wing of the machine, it is stated, suddenly collapsed causing the biplane to fall to earth. It is thought that Lieutenant Arthur, when he found the machine falling, managed to unbuckle himself from it and jump clear before the machine reached the ground, as his body was picked up one hundred yards from where the aeroplane lay.

The body of the ill-fated officer was terribly shattered and death must have been instantaneous. Lieutenant Arthur joined the Montrose Squadron only a week ago. Various theories are advanced as to the cause of the accident, which occurred at a height of two thousand feet. One suggestion is that the pilot was practising banking and another is that the mishap was caused by an explosion, but the former theory is regarded as the most likely explanation of the disaster. A military court of inquiry was held during the day but no information was divulged as to the cause of the accident.

Mr. Desmond Arthur's Career

Mr. Desmond Arthur's career as an airman has not been a very long one. A member of an old Clare family, he was the second son of the late Mt. Thomas F. Arthur, Glenomera, and was only thirty years of age. He was an all-round sportsman and particularly interested in motoring, having won a number of prizes in speed trials. It was at Leopardstown in 1910 that Arthur first showed his liking for the adventurous sport of flying. He attended the first aviation meeting there as a spectator and having been introduced to Cecil Grace, himself an Irishman, he asked the airman to take him as a passenger upon one of his flights. Grace was unwilling to do so, but he yielded after a time to the young man's request. This experience enhanced Arthur's desire to become an airman and he went to Brooklands to learn the art. Before long he showed a courage and daring which promised that he would reach the first rank of airmen. These qualities were especially displayed on the occasion of the test for his pilot's certificate from the Royal

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Aero Club. Instead of contenting himself with flying to the minimum height of two hundred feet, he soared up over two thousand feet, trying to make a record in altitude. Arthur came to Ireland last year with his 70 h.p. Bristol monoplane for the next flying meeting at Leopardstown. But he was un-lucky and did not appear to have as much advantage as the other airmen who attended. Valentine and the ill-fated Astley covered part of the distance to Belfast. Lieutenant Porte made a short flight and then came back. But Desmond Arthur did not leave the course at all. Starting in the far corner of the field, his monoplane "misfired" and was slow to rise. Arthur was doubtful whether he could clear the crowd stand and chose the safer course of coming down. He descended near the Press tent and in doing so ripped a tyre off one of the wheels of his monoplane. The machine dragged back for a second start. Arthur was about to go off again when Mr C.G. Grey, editor of the *Aeroplane*, discovered a large hole in one of the planes. Arthur wanted to patch the hole with canvas and fly ahead but he was dissuaded from such a rash attempt. Needless to say he was exceedingly disappointed. This daring young Irishman fully realised the danger of flying. On one occasion he dismissed it lightly with the remark

"If one stopped to think of that it would be childish. One must take it as all in the day's work".

A man of unassuming manner and unfailing good spirit, he made many friends. Only last month he was gazetted to the Royal Flying Corps. He was also a Lieutenant in the Motor Reserve and in the 5th Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers.

Notes

Extra information on some of the people and events in the above article.

Lieutenant Desmond L. Arthur

Lieutenant Desmond L. Arthur was born in 1884 and he died on the 27th May 1913. His funeral took place to Sleepyhilllock Cemetery, Montrose, Angus in Scotland. As he was one of the first members of the Royal Flying Corps to lose his life in a plane crash, the funeral attracted a very

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large crowd. The military inquiry into the accident found that it was caused by pilot error. Shortly after the findings were published, officers reported that the ghost of Lieutenant Arthur was appearing in the officers mess and around the base. Later the official cause of the crash was changed to a fault in the wing of the BE2 plane and soon after this the ghost of Arthur was observed in the officers mess throwing papers on the fire. He never returned.

First Irish Aviation Meeting Leopardstown 1910

The weather delayed the first Irish Aviation Meeting to be held at the racecourse at Leopardstown, Co. Dublin over two days in September. On the afternoon of the second day Cecil Grace brought out his Henry Farman machine, but due to the rain he had problems with the propeller, as it sucked up water from the ground. This held up his take off. After a time he made it off the ground and indulged in some fairly high flying. Grace also demonstrated the passenger capabilities of his Farman machine, carrying several passengers for long hops along the course. One of these would have been Lieutenant Arthur.

Cecil Grace died in December 1910 while attempting to fly from Dover to Calais. His body was recovered on the 14th March 1911 in the harbour at Ostend Belgium.

Dublin to Belfast Aeroplane Contest 1912

Large crowds gathered at Leopardstown racecourse to witness the start of the Aero Club of Ireland contest from Dublin to Belfast. Bad weather prevailed on the day and with a strong westerly wind the start of the contest was delayed for some time. At 4.25pm the all clear was given and the first of the aviators, Astley, moved forward and took off, followed by J. Valentine, Arthur and Porte. Arthur failed to get clear of the ground and in landing buckled one of his wheels. Lieutenant Porte found the conditions much too trying and after going three miles returned to Leopardstown. Astley and Valentine persevered through the veil weather conditions,

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Valentine eventually coming down at Newry Co .Down, while Astley gave up a at Drogheda Co. Louth.

The Prize Fund

The committee decided to divide the first prize of £300 between Astley and Valentine. While the Shell Motor prize of £50 went to Porte. A special prize of £25 was awarded to Arthur. All of the four aviators also received £40 for their expenses.

H.J.D. Astley

H.J.D. Astley was killed on the 21st September 1912 when his plane crashed at Belfast. He died while executing a sharp turn with his machine. Many of the spectators who watched the accident were of the opinion that Astley sacrificed his life in a brave attempt to avoid colliding with the crowd. Astley previously competed in the Round Britain Race in 1911 in which The Daily Mail had put up a prize of £10,000

James Valentine

James Valentine joined the R.F.C. and served in the Great War 1914-18. During this conflict he was awarded the D.S.O., Legion D'Honneur and the Order of St. George, He was killed on the 7th August 1917, aged 29 years. He held the rank of Major at the time of his death in Russia.

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He has no known grave and his name is on the memorial at Archangle. The husband of Louisa Eileen Valentine nee Knox and son of James & Fanny Valentine of Brixton London

Sources

Irish Times 31st May 1913

Montrose Air Station Heritage Centre

Montrose Review

Commonwealth War Graves Commission