

THE MAPPLEBECKS - GILBERT & TOM

by Ralph Barker

Tallest and youngest of the 'contemptible' little army of pilots and observers of the Royal Flying Corps who flew to France on 13 August 1914 was the 6ft 3in, 21 year old Gilbert Mapplebeck. Six days later, he and another young pilot, name of Philip Joubert de la Ferté, formed the vanguard of aerial support for the British Expeditionary Force as they flew the RFC's first air reconnaissances of the war.

To save weight and improve performance they flew without observers, but it proved a false economy. Although each had a designated task, they were briefed to keep together initially in case one or other of them were forced down with mechanical trouble, a perpetual anxiety at that time. But in poor visibility and low cloud they soon lost their way and each other. Mapplebeck eventually completed his task, but Joubert had to land several times to fix his position, and he spent an abortive eight hours before returning crestfallen to base. It was not a good beginning.

Once the lesson was learned that observers must be carried, much more was accomplished, surveillance of enemy movements proving crucial during the retreat from Mons. Among the pilots mentioned in dispatches was 'Gibb' Mapplebeck. By the evening of 9 September 1914 the German assault had been held, Paris had been saved, and the Battle of the Marne had been won.

These reconnaissances were not unopposed. On 22 September, during an attempt to drop a primitive bomb on a German observation balloon, Mapplebeck's machine was attacked by a German two-seater whose observer put a bullet in his right thigh, severing an artery. Fortunately a muscle that was also severed acted as a tourniquet to the artery. But the bullet drove two 5-franc pieces from Mapplebeck's pocket into his groin, removing the tip of his penis.

He managed to get back over the lines to force-land, where the ground forces found him unconscious. Lifting him out, they kept him in a sitting position to maintain the tourniquet effect and staunch the bleeding. He was taken to hospital in Paris.

There a volunteer nurse, a relation of the Mumm champagne family, took charge of him and later drove him south to Nice to recuperate. Three months later, after refusing home leave, he was back in action, none the worse, according to his younger brother Tom, for the truncation of his career.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Gibb and Tom Mapplebeck's great-grandfather was a 19th century lawyer and Parliamentarian from Liverpool named Edward Cardwell, later Viscount Cardwell: he numbered among his many achievements a double first at Balliol. As President of the Board of Trade he introduced the Merchant Shipping Act, which became the code of the mercantile marine, and in 1871, as Secretary of State for War, he modernised the army by abolishing the purchase system – the purchase of commissions – besides introducing short-service commissions and founding the system of county regiments. Both Gibb and Tom began service with the King's Liverpool Regiment before transferring to the RFC.

Tom of similar physique to his brother, had planned to follow him directly into the RFC, but the family practice – Mapplebeck senior was a dental surgeon – was in difficulties and Tom could not raise the £75 that was required to learn to fly. A talented linguist, he took a job in a shipping office in Hamburg, from where, while on holiday, he visited Gibb at Netheravon during the mobilisation exercises of June 1914.

Returning from Hamburg by sea on the eve of the declaration of war, Tom gave the Admiralty details of the mine-free channel they had followed from the Elbe. He had met Sefton Brancker on his visit to Netheravon, and he

went to the War Office to enlist his help. 'Go to Hendon and learn to fly', said Brancker. But he still didn't have the money, so for the moment he enlisted in the King's Liverpool Regiment. Thus both brothers were involved in the fighting at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915.

NIGHT FLYING HAZARDS

On the first day of the battle, 10 March, the German positions were overrun, but next day the weather clamped. Yet early on that second morning three pilots of 4 Sqn, carrying primitive bombs, took off in darkness from a frontline aerodrome, using electric torches to monitor their instruments. Their objective was a rail junction at Lille. The first part of their course was marked out for them by lamps on the ground, and they were to arrive over their target at daybreak. One of the pilots was Gibb Mapplebeck. Apart from a short practice flight the previous evening, none of them had flown in darkness before.

Because of the weather, the squadron commander, Charles Longcroft, sought a cancellation. He was told that if the raid was successful it might end the war: therefore the pilots must go. He described both the order and its justification as ridiculous; but he had to obey it. It ended in the disaster he expected. One pilot crashed soon after takeoff, the other two failed to return.

Of these, one was shot down and died from his injuries. The other was also forced down, but he was unhurt, and he had time to set fire to his BE2a before hiding in a ditch. This was Gibb Mapplebeck.



*Captain G.W. Mapplebeck of 4 Squadron before receiving his DSO.
:JMB/GSL Collection*

His subsequent adventures, during which he was helped by Belgian and Dutch patriots, ended with an escape to England in a fishing smack. Among his mementoes was a poster offering a reward for his capture and threatening