

# THE CAPTURE OF GILBERT INSALL

BY A.D. HARVEY

On 7 November 1915 a Vickers FB5 of 11 Squadron RFC, piloted by Second Lieutenant Gilbert Insall with Air Mechanic First Class Thomas Donald as observer, forced down a German aircraft, either an Aviatik or a LVG, and dropped a small bomb on it, setting it alight.<sup>1</sup> On the way home the FB5 was hit by ground fire and was obliged to land just behind the French front line. Despite shelling by German artillery, Insall and Donald managed to repair their aeroplane during the hours of darkness and returned to their base next day. For this exploit, Insall was recommended for the Victoria Cross and Donald, who had actually aimed and fired the FB5's Lewis gun and released the bomb, was recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal, and also promoted to corporal. One fellow officer in 11 Squadron wrote, *It wasn't a V.C. job in my opinion, it was very ordinary, shooting down an enemy machine and escaping over the trenches*, an assessment with which many readers might agree.<sup>2</sup>

On 14 December 1915, while these awards were still being processed, Insall and Donald's FB5 was damaged in another aerial fight – believed to be with Hauptmann Martin Zander of Fliegerabteilung 90 – and subsequently hit by anti-aircraft fire and forced to land behind the German lines. Both Insall and Donald were wounded. On recovery, Insall made three attempts to escape, the last successful. For this he was awarded a Military Cross in addition to his Victoria Cross. A circumstantial account of his experiences appeared in the 1917 edition of *Who's Who* – other people's entries either confined themselves to the simple fact of being wounded or made Prisoner of War or else did not mention it at all – and in the 1918 edition a slightly longer version was printed, which was repeated in every annual edition of *Who's Who* until Insall's death 55 years later. The impression that Insall was more than usually vain and boastful is confirmed by his mentioning that he *underwent two operations whilst in captivity* – one of the operations was to extract a large fragment of anti-aircraft shell from his hip but the other was simply to remove his appendix. Not many people get to record a routine appendectomy in a reference book as widely circulated as *Who's Who*. This *Who's Who* entry is the only account of Insall's VC exploit from his own hand to have survived, but a longer and more detailed narrative of his being taken prisoner is preserved in two different copies in The National Archives at Kew and is given in the accompanying text box.<sup>3</sup>

Gilbert Insall (1894-1972) was the son of an English dentist with a practice in Paris and was himself studying to become a dentist in the French capital when war came in 1914. With his teenaged younger brother Algernon, generally known as 'Jack', he enlisted in the 18th Battalion Royal Fusiliers (the Universities and Public Schools Battalion) and later transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. In due course the brothers were posted to 11 Squadron, the RFC's first dedicated fighter squadron, Gilbert as a pilot, Jack as an observer. It was Jack who was responsible for the squadron's first aerial victory on 9 September 1915.<sup>4</sup> On 2 October 1915 Gilbert Insall's FB5 was involved in a combat with an LVG. On this occasion his observer (who fired the gun) was a fellow officer, who consequently was the one to write up the combat report – which rather suggests that if Donald had been a commissioned officer rather than an Air Mechanic First Class he might have been the one to report on their exploits on 7 November and to be awarded the VC.<sup>5</sup>

Gilbert Insall remained with the Royal Air Force after the war. He was evidently not regarded as a potential future Air Marshal, for he did not attend Staff College and though promoted to Group Captain in 1935 ended his service career, in the earlier part of the Second World War, in command of a

Sir,

With reference to your communication 125145/2 (A.G.3.), of the 16th instant, I have the honour to submit as directed the following statement relative to my capture as prisoner of war by the enemy on December 13th[sic], 1915 :-

No. 11 Squadron R.F.C. was at that time maintaining a permanent patrol over the area ARRAS - THE SOMME RIVER, and I was detailed on December 14th, 1915 for early morning patrol, on Vickers' Fighting Biplane No. 5074 with Corporal T. Donald R.F.C. as gunner.

When we had been in the air for about 1½ hours, a hostile aircraft was sighted coming round ARRAS on the enemy's side of the lines, and was observed to turn South towards BAPAUME.

We crossed the lines in order to cut him off and, getting within range near BAPAUME, opened fire with our machine gun. Our height at that moment was 8000 feet, that of the hostile aircraft (a tractor two-seater), roughly 7000 feet. A dive at right angles to his line of flight brought us to close quarters, and Corporal Donald opened fire as we turned right-handedly over the tail of the enemy machine. The latter then opened fire without altering his course, a bullet from his machine gun entering the front of the Vickers' nacelle, passing fore and aft through my observer's seat, cutting both right aileron control cables, grazing my right leg, and going through the petrol tank behind me. The engine, being pressure-fed, immediately stopped.

The control lever was drawn over to the left by the remaining control cables (left), lateral control of the machine becoming practically impossible.

I reduced the dive to a slow glide of about 30 miles per hour and, instructing Corporal Donald to lean over to the left, contrived to turn West towards the Lines, there being just sufficient control with the left ailerons to accomplish this.

On looking round I found that the hostile aircraft had disappeared. I think our approximate position at that moment was 2 kilometres North of Bapaume.

We had glided about 500 feet when an A.A. shell, the first fired, burst close under the machine, fragments hitting Corporal Donald in the legs and myself in the hip.

A.A. shells were then fairly plentiful as we approached a railhead which I think must have been Achiet-le-Grand. I felt dizzy for a few minutes after being hit, but regained complete consciousness until we landed. We passed over Achiet and glided for sometime in a Westerly direction within sight of the trenches which appeared nearer than they actually were. As we approached a small triangular wood the Bois de BIEZ or perhaps de LONGEAST, we were hailed by fire from a large rocket-battery. The shooting was very bad at first. As we came over the battery, we could plainly see a set of about 20 stands in two rows which fired 3 to 6 rockets at a time. We were then at about 1000 feet and their last burst bracketed us. I had to dive in order to avoid them. We continued gliding and came to earth the other side of the wood, in a large field. The tyres burst and we lurched forward a bit; Corporal Donald and I got out of the machine and I got into his seat and loosened the incendiary-bomb tube (which had been prepared for burning the machine with the igniting battery fixed to the tube.) Corporal Donald pushed it up from below as it jammed. I got back to my seat and put a bomb in the tube; the bomb jammed in the tube and would not go off, I think it must have been shot through. Whilst I was banging it, a German came up on a cycle and covered us with a pistol. I told him in German I was coming down, and threw the contraption into the seat hoping that the bomb might ignite. I was able to walk about six yards, clear of the machine should it catch on fire, and then lay down. The Germans who came up bandaged us with our Field Dressings and carried us off, by horse-ambulance, to Achiet-le-Petit where the nearest operating theatre was situated. The surgeon took a piece of shell weighing 450 grammes out of my hip and gave it to me as a souvenir. Corporal Donald had a smaller piece in his thigh. I saw him being operated upon but was not allowed to speak to him until long afterwards, and we were kept apart, so I am unable to say how many wounds he had in all. Subsequently we were sent to Bapaume and then to St. Quentin where we remained for about four weeks prior to being sent to Germany.

I have the honour to be, Sir,  
Your obedient servant,  
22/11/17.

Lieut. G.S.M. Insall, V.C. R.F.C.  
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