

Tom Owen

A teacher who went to war – Part 1

Compiled by Richard Chancellor

Tom Owen, from Welshpool, completed his education at University College Wales, Aberystwyth and became a teacher at Llanelly County School, where he became a training officer for its Cadet Force.

He applied for a commission during April 1915 and, after undergoing a medical at Swansea on 26 May, was commissioned into the South Staffordshire Regiment as a Second Lieutenant. After the end of the school's summer term, Owen went to Clifton College, Bristol, on his initial training course, where his time was filled with sessions on such basics as squad drill, rifle instruction, rope lashing, bridge building and practice reconnaissance.

Training completed, he joined his regiment, the 11th South Staffords, at Penkridge Bank Camp, Stafford. Life there comprised mainly physical training, parades and some musketry. On 5 April 1916, he volunteered for the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and received orders on 19 May. Owen sailed from Devonport on HMT *Orsova* on 22 May, one of 1500 troops on board.

After disembarking at Port Said, Owen travelled by rail to Sidi Bishr camp, near Alexandria. From there he was posted to Zeitoun, near Cairo, on 25 June. Daily routine was quite leisurely, a combination of lectures, training and social activities.

On 6 August, he was transferred to El Kantara (Hill 40), closer to action with the Turks – he could hear artillery that was firing 27 miles away at Katia. Life was still filled with training and routine daily activities. Owen applied to join the RFC and was interviewed on 23 September 1916. After more than two months, he finally arrived at Aboukir for preliminary training. This aerodrome was the centre for RFC training in Egypt at that time. It housed three Reserve Squadrons: 21 RS, with MF Se.II 'Shorthorns' for preliminary training, 22 RS, with Avro 504s for intermediate training, and 23 RS with BE2 variants for advanced training.

Owen had kept his diary since joining up in 1915 but only those entries related to his RFC/RAF service are presented here, with relevant logbook entries following in italics. Tom Owen often opened a daily entry with a description of the weather in Welsh: a translation has been added, the first time each description is used.

30th November, *Braf[nice]*. Depart Alexandria 1045, arrive Aboukir Aerodrome 11.30, by taxi with Lapraik [David McGeachie Lapraik], Smith and Leeson. Found a dozen or more 'Orsova' people there, Gibbs completed. Lectures straight away in afternoon, round sheds. The same four share an EP tent, bed early.

1st December, *Braf*. Squad drill 7 until 8am. Lectures on RAF [engine], Lewis Gun and Co-operation with Artillery. Round



Tom Owen, May 1915, as a newly commissioned second lieutenant in the South Staffordshire Regiment. His short stature is evident. Header image is of Llanelly County School, in Wales.

engines and sheds. The working of the engine beginning to dawn on me. Letter writing, bed early.

2nd December, *Rain*. Squad drill 7am, rain interrupted us. Revision chiefly for those taking RFC exam on Monday. Round the sheds.

3rd December, *Braf*. Round the sheds. Letter writing. Down as far as the sea, delightful spot. Fort, cannon by. Bed early.

4th December, *Braf*. Down at Alex with RFC car arrive 9.45am, shopping. At Hafod, Moharrem Bey. Met Leeson, Lapraik and Smith at Groppi's. Capt Lloyd Jones (at DB) writing letters at Club, back with 9pm.