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A Critical Obituary

Reynold Macpherson, 22 January 2011



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Introduction

This chapter honours Henry Douglas Macpherson, born 20 March 1898 and killed in action 14 October 1917. It shows that he was a newly trained fighter pilot shot down by a highly skilled and battle hardened German Ace flying a vastly superior aircraft. It concludes, sadly, that Douglas' life was defined by his wasteful albeit courageous death.

Background

Douglas was the third child of Henry 'Harry' and Lily Macpherson (née Hallewell) of Headingley Hall, Leeds. He was named Henry after his father who was widely known as 'Harry'. To avoid confusion, the child was henceforth known by his second name.

Douglas was a second generation Englishman. His grandfather Alexander Sinclair Macpherson (b. 8 December 1834, Aberdeen, d. 30 December 1902, West Riding Yorkshire) was the second son of William McPherson (a flaxdresser b. 17 October 1802 in Portsoy, Banff, d. 10 June 1866 in Leslie, Fifeshire) and Catherine Alexander Sinclair (b. 1801 d. abt. 1855 in Leslie, Fifeshire). William was in turn the son of William McPherson (a flesher) and Elspet Duff, both of Porstoy, Banffshire.

Douglas' older siblings were

- Alfred Sinclair Macpherson (b. 20 April 1895 d. 20 February 1968) and
- Herbert 'Bertie' Alexander Macpherson (b. 4 August 1896 d. 5 June 1976).

He had five younger siblings;

- William Stuart 'Bob' Macpherson (b. 30 September 1901 d. 7 July 1978),
- Eric Gordon Macpherson (b. 1 June 1907 d. 24 January 1979),
- Eileen Macpherson (b. 13 April 1910 d. 23 April 1989),
- Pemberton 'Peggy' Macpherson (b. 14 August 1914 d. 20 July 2003) and
- Mary Sinclair Macpherson (b. 22 April 1917 d. 22 August 2004).

The Legacy

The last time my wife Nicki and I visited Douglas' younger sister Eileen in Leeds she gave us the photographic portrait that appears on the front of this chapter. She asked us to hang it in our home in his honour. We did that.

By Eileen's account, and all other verbal descriptions that have survived in the family, Douglas was a very bright, decent and open-hearted fellow whose tragic death is still felt deeply in the family.

Douglas was a fighter pilot in the First World War. He was killed on 14 Oct 1917 on active service flying over Belgium in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). He was 19. Understanding why this happened takes us to the nature of schooling, society and war, as conceived at the time.

Schooling

Like many upper middle-class boys of his generation, Douglas was despatched to boarding school in the belief that it would prepare him thoroughly for a life of leadership, duty and service, whatever path he chose. All of Harry and Lilly's boys went to Sedburgh School. Indeed their fourth son Eric (known as Gordon) was shoulder-

tapped to replace the soon-to-retire head teacher of Sedburgh's preparatory school, until he visited his older brother Alfred in New Zealand and took up farming there, although returning many times to visit 'Home'.

While Sedburgh admitted girls for the first time in 1981, and is a very different school today, at the time it was then deeply committed to service to 'King and Country' and honoured those who made 'the supreme sacrifice'. The Preface of the *Sedburgh School Record of War Service 1914-1918* (1925) noted that

Two hundred and fifty Old Sedburghians and four masters gave their lives for their country There were rather less than two thousand Old Sedburghians of all ages living in 1918. This list contains the names of over twelve hundred and fifty, a record of which we may well be proud The British honours received were two hundred and sixty six.

The war service of three Old Sedburghians were recorded (p. 65) as

Macpherson, A.S. School House 1909-1914. Private, Royal Army Medical Corps. France 1914-1915. Discharged due to ill health contracted on service.

Macpherson, H.A. School House, 1910-1914. Lieutenant, East Yorkshire Regiment. Egypt, 1916; Salonica 1916-1917; India 1917-1919. Wounded 1916.

Macpherson, H.D. School House, 1912-1916. 2nd Lieutenant, Royal Air Force. Killed in action in France, October 14, 1917.

Douglas' official commemoration reads 'In memory of Henry Douglas Macpherson, 2Lt. 29th Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, died Sunday 14 Oct 1917, aged 19, buried in Mendinghem Military Cemetery, Poperings, West Vlaanderen, Belgium, grave VII. D. 45.' He was posthumously awarded the George V 1914-1918 medal and The Great War for Civilisation 1914-1919 medal.

While these were the official facts of Douglas' 'supreme sacrifice', the family's experience was something else.

How the Family were Informed

On the 15th of October 1917, Douglas' family received an official telegram, known then as a 'wire', that told them in standard terms that their son had been killed. A few days later a letter arrived:

15.10.17

Dear Mr Macpherson,

In confirmation of my wire this morning I deeply regret to have to write and say that your son was killed yesterday morning. I am afraid we have no details as to how he was killed as apparently he was late in taking off with the patrol and the patrol never saw him. He must have been killed instantaneously as he was shot in the eye and hip. We found his body last night in the trenches and brought it back. He is to be buried this afternoon at the military cemetery at Prousn. I am afraid that further than this we have no further information.

I hope you accept the sincere sympathy of both officers and men of the squadron in the loss of your son. He was always very cheerful, willing and full of fun. He was very stout-hearted and though he had only been with us a short time he was doing very well and was very popular with everyone.

Your son was flying a Nieuport single seater machine at the time.

With our deepest sympathy

I remain

Yours sincerely

(signed) A P Pinot[?] Lieut.

The details of this tragic loss to the family remained much of a mystery until author Mike O'Connor wrote to Mrs Jane Burpitt, Douglas' neice, on the 4th of October 2002, expressing interest "in anything that remains from your uncle's service in the First War in the way of letters, logbook, diaries, photographs, etc." While Jane was unable to help him, the materials provided by O'Connor shed fresh light on the tragedy. There were photocopies of a page from 29 Squadron's Record Book as well as photocopied pages from O'Connor's book *Airfield and Airmen: Ypres* and other books that described the conditions at the time, as well as identifying who actually shot Douglas down. These materials enabled my follow up research that has filled in more of the details.

The Shooting Down of Douglas Macpherson

The entries in 29 Squadron's Record Book for the 14th of October 1917 show that the early morning patrol was plagued by delayed takeoffs as well as mechanical, rigging and armaments problems. Captain Rose, in Nieuport Scout B3625, took off at 5.55 am but returned at 7.00 with his "Engine vibrating". He did not fly again that day. Lt. Collier in B6797 took off at 5.45 but returned at 7.00 am with "Rigging troubles". He continued his patrol in another Nieuport Scout B6793, leaving at 7.00 am, found the rest of the patrol that had left at 5.45 am and then returned with them at 7.35 am. Lt. Payne in B6786 also took off at 5.45 am but returned at 6.50 am with "Gun mounting trouble" that forced him to break off from air combat, as explained below, confirming that there were enemy aircraft in the area. Only two pilots, Lt. Salmond in B3578 and Lt. De Fontenay in B3582, took off at 5.45 am and returned at 7.35 am without reporting any incidents.

The Nieuport Scout B6778 piloted by 2 Lt. Macpherson was apparently due to leave on patrol at 5.45 am with five other aircraft, but according to the letter above, left a little later, alone, and never caught up with the patrol. When he failed to return at the expected time of about 7.35 am he was initially listed as 'missing'. This initial entry was later ruled out and replaced by the note "Crashed at Sheet 28 D7 c 0.0 pilot killed".

A note nearby in the Squadron's Record Book adds "7 E.A. Scouts seen over POELCA PPELLE 9,000 ft at 6.40. am. 1 engaged. See report." The report referred to was 'Combats in the Air, No. 170' as dictated by 2/Lt. J.D. Payne, who flew Nieuport Scout B6786 armed with "1 Lewis gun, forward". The outcome was recorded as 'Indecisive'. The hostile aircraft were listed as "7 Albatross Scouts". 2/Lt J.D. Payne's Combat Report narrative explains:

While on patrol, on O.P., [observation post] was moving over POELCA PPELLE at about 9,000 ft., we were attacked by 7 E.A.s who dived from the east. I got underneath the leader who was firing at one of our patrol, and fired a burst of about 40 rounds into his fuselage at close range, without noticeable effect. He turned about and attacked me, followed by the E.A. formation. I again fired about 20 rounds at the leader, but had then to break off the combat owing to my gun mounting sticking.

Recall, Lt Payne then returned to base at 6.50 am, with the rest of his patrol members returning by 7.35 am, except Lt Douglas Macpherson.

What happened to him is partially explained in a book entitled *Above the Lines: A Complete Record of the Fighter Aces of the German Air Service, Naval Air Service and Flanders Marine Corps, 1914-1918* (Franks, Bailey, & Guest, 1994). On page 78 is the list of the verified 'victories' of Leutnant Erwin Böhme. His 19th 'victory', on 14 October 1917, was a Nieuport Scout from 29 Squadron flying over Wieltje at 7.42 am, almost precisely when Douglas went missing.

Further information found about Erwin Böhme suggests that Douglas came up alone against a much older, more highly trained and much more experienced fighter pilot flying a technologically superior aircraft, accompanied by at least one other member of his jasta [squadron, by then was known as Jasta Boelcke] who verified the 'victory'.

Leutnant Erwin Böhme

Böhme was born in Holzminden on the Weser River on the 29th of July 1879, which made him 38, exactly twice Douglas' age, when they met over Wieltje on the 14th of October 1917. A year earlier, on the 28th of October

1916, Böhme had accidentally collided with and killed his friend and Commanding Officer, Oswald Boelcke. An intense patriot, Böhme immediately returned to “duty for the Fatherland; indeed it probably spurred him to greater things as his record clearly shows.” (Franks, Bailey, & Guest, p. 77)

Böhme was an archetypical German war hero feted by the press and the public. He had originally qualified as an engineer at the Dortmund Technical College. He had worked in Germany and Switzerland, and then East Africa where he probably learned to fly. When WW1 broke out he quickly returned to Germany. Although already 35, he volunteered for flying duties in a Jaeger (Fighter) Regiment. He was held back as a fighter pilot instructor for a year before being posted to Jasta 10 (10 Squadron) in Kargohl 2 (2 Group) on the Eastern Front. He reportedly shot down three enemy planes before being invited to join Boelcke’s new unit, Jasta 2. He was soon accredited with another five ‘victories’, before accidentally killing his CO. The accident occurred during their sixth mission on the 28th of October 1916 (Wikipedia, 2009c):



Böhme, Boelcke, [the ‘Red’ Baron] von Richthofen, and three other pilots from Jasta 2 pounced upon two British planes. In the scrambled attack in gusty weather, Richthofen was cut out of his firing approach on one British plane by an interposed German plane. Böhme and Boelcke were both closing on the other.

Boelcke had to swerve to avoid a midair collision in the dogfight. Böhme's Albatros briefly collided with that of Oswald Boelcke. The wheels of Böhme's plane barely brushed the fabric of the top wing of Boelcke's craft, but it was enough to start the fabric unravelling. Boelcke struggled for control as his plane's control surface shredded in the turbulence. He skilfully crash landed after the entire upper wing tore loose in a cloud. In his haste to be airborne, he had not fastened his seat belt. Böhme survived the accident, as he had suffered only landing gear damage, but Boelcke was killed by his relatively mild impact.

Böhme’s deep respect for his dead hero meant returning immediately to duty after Boelcke’s funeral. He soon took his ‘victory’ tally to 12 and was awarded an Iron Cross 1st Class. He was wounded on the 11th of February 1917 and, on the 12th of March, was awarded the Knight’s Cross with Swords of the Hohenzollern House Order. The German Air Service then rested him for a few months as an instructor in a training unit. On the 2nd of July he was given command of Jasta 29, soon scoring another ‘victory’. He was wounded in the right hand on the 19th of August, before returning to command Jasta 2, henceforth known as Jasta Boelcke, on the 28th of August 1917.

Böhme recorded 10 more ‘victories’ by the 29th of November, including Douglas’s Nieuport Scout B6778 on the 14th of October 1917. This took his final tally to 24 when he was killed in a dogfight over Zonnebeke. While shooting down a Belgium Sopwith Camel he failed to see an AWFK 8 of 10 Squadron RFC behind him. Five days earlier Böhme had been notified that he had been awarded Germany’s highest decoration for bravery; the Pour le Mérite.

Lt. Erwin Böhme was buried by the British with full military honours at Keerselaarhook. His remains were reinterred after the war at Hinter den Linden. (Great War Flying Display Team, no date).

Critical Analysis

When Erwin Böhme and at least one other German pilot attacked the lone Lt Douglas Macpherson, they had huge advantages in training, battle experience and tactical organisation. Further research shows that there were also significant technological differences between their fighter aircraft.

Douglas trained in a Tiger Moth two-seater (see right). When he was posted to 29 Squadron, he converted to the Nieuport Scout 17. Two examples are shown below. It was a single-seater biplane fighter aircraft manufactured by the French Nieuport company (Wikipedia, 2009e). When Nieuport 17s were first introduced in March 1916 they were superior to any other British fighter at that time with regard to manoeuvrability and rate of climb.

Unfortunately, the narrow lower wing, marking it as a "sesquiplane" design with literally one-and-a-half wings, was weak due to its single spar construction, and sometimes disintegrated in flight. I will come back to the different gun mountings used below, a key issue.

By early 1917, well before Douglas was trained, the Nieuport Scout 17 was already outclassed in most respects by the latest German fighter, the Albatros D.IIIs (see below). It was a single-seater biplane that had come into service in August 1916. It was so successful that the German aircraft manufacturer Albatros-Flugzeugwerke eventually built 1,866 (Wikipedia, 2009b).



Two Nieuport 17s. Left is a scaled-down replica with a wing-mounted Lewis gun at a display in 2007 in the insignia of the Lafayette Escadrille, a squadron of the French Air Service during World War I formed mostly of volunteer American pilots. The Nieuport 17 to the right appears to be a French Service aircraft armed with a synchronised Vickers machine gun, yet with British roundel insignia added.



Left are four plan views of the Albatros D.III. The reproduction D. III to the right was completed by Koloman Mayrhofer and his CraftLab team after 14 years and nearly 14,000 man-hours of work at their workshops in Vienna.

The technological differences between the two aircraft are clarified in Table 1 below. It confirms that the German pilot who shot Douglas down was flying an aircraft that that was longer, wider and higher, with greater wing area, lift, and power, and therefore had greater maneuverability. They also had the advantage of greater speed, range, ceiling, climb and significantly superior armament.

Table 1: The characteristics and performance of the Nieuport Scout 17 and the Albatros D.III.

| Characteristics | Nieuport Scout 17 | Albatros D.III |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Crew | one, pilot | one, pilot |
| Length | 5.8 m (19 ft) | 7.33 m (24 ft 0 in) |
| Wingspan | 8.2 m (26 ft 9 in) | 9.00 m (29 ft 6 in) |
| Height | 2.4 m (7 ft 10 in) | 2.90 m (9 ft 6 in) |
| Wing area | 14.75 m ² (158.77 ft ²) | 23.6 m ² (254 ft ²) |
| Empty weight | 375 kg (827 lb) | 695 kg (1,532 lb) |
| Loaded weight | 560 kg (1,235 lb) | 886 kg (1,949 lb) |
| Powerplant | 1 × Le Rhône 9J 9-cylinder rotary engine, 82 kW (110 hp) | 1 × Mercedes D.IIIa inline water cooled engine, 127 kW (170 hp) |
| Performance | Nieuport Scout 17 | Albatros D.III |
| Maximum speed | 164 km/h (89 kn, 102 mph) | 175 km/h (94 kn, 109 mph) |
| Range | 249 km (135 nmi, 155 mi) | 480 km (261 nmi, 300 mi) |
| Service ceiling | 5,300 m (17,390 ft) | 5,500 m (18,044 ft) |
| Rate of climb | 4.3 m/s (856 ft/min) | 4.5 m/s (886ft/min) |
| Wing loading | 37.9 kg/m ² (7.77 lb/ft ²) | 37.5 kg/m ² (7.67 lb/ft ²) |
| Power/mass | 0.15 kW/kg (0.09 hp/lb) | 0.13 kW/kg (0.081 hp/lb) |
| Armament | 1 × Lewis light machine gun on a Foster mounting on the upper wing | 2 × 7.92 mm (.312 in) LMG 08/15 machine guns |

The differences were therefore understated when it was said that the Albatros D.III was “faster, more manoeuvrable, and, more importantly, was equipped with two machine guns firing through the propeller” (O'Connor, 2001, p. 137).

The Nieuport 17s in British service were actually fitted with a Lewis machine-gun. It was light, air-cooled and used self-contained 97-round magazines. The Foster mounting was a curved metal rail which allowed the pilot to bring the gun down to change ammunition drums or clear jams (Wikipedia, 2009d). As 2/Lt J.D. Payne's Combat Report above illustrates, 'gun mounting trouble' was not uncommon.

The Foster-mounted Lewis gun arrangement performed so poorly that the Nieuport Scout 17s in French service were re-armed with a Vickers machine gun with belt-fed ammunition. The Vickers was far less likely to jam and its mechanism was synchronised to fire safely through the propeller arc. The key point is that, even with these modifications, the French pilots had *half* the firepower of the Albatros D.IIIs. It also means that the British pilots like Douglas flying Nieuport Scout 17s not only had *less than half* the firepower of Albatros D.IIIs, their weapons and mountings were prone to breakdowns.

Two other two key factors were that the Albatros D.IIIs were in highly expert hands and organised to use the group tactics devised by Oswald Boelcke. Boelcke had transformed German aerial warfare after a visit to Turkey by introducing coordinated group dog fighting tactics.

In addition to Erwin Böhme, the Albatros D.III was the aircraft flown by many of the top German aces, including Manfred von Richthofen, known popularly by the British as 'The Red Baron', Ernst Udet, Erich Löwenhardt, Kurt Wolff, and Karl Emil Schäfer. It's advanced design ensured that it became the preeminent fighter from the period of German aerial dominance known as 'Bloody April' 1917 (Wikipedia, 2009a).

Conclusion

The AFC was equipped with inferior aircraft, its pilots were inadequately trained and its leaders were a poor match with their German adversaries.

British pilots like Douglas flying Nieuport Scout 17s in October 1917 in World War 1 must have been aware of the major technological disadvantages they faced, and the expertise and fame of their combatants. And yet they persisted in attempting to dominate their sector of the Ypres battlefield.

Douglas would also have known that his aircraft had less than half the firepower of any Albatros D.III he met and that it was unreliable.

His takeoff on the morning of the 14th of October 1917 was therefore an act of great courage. He must also have taken off in the hope that he would soon join five other members of 29 Squadron. It was his gross misfortune that he encountered, alone, at least one of Germany's most famous, experienced and skilled fighter aces.

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