An escaped prisoner of war

Dorothy revised 06.11.2014

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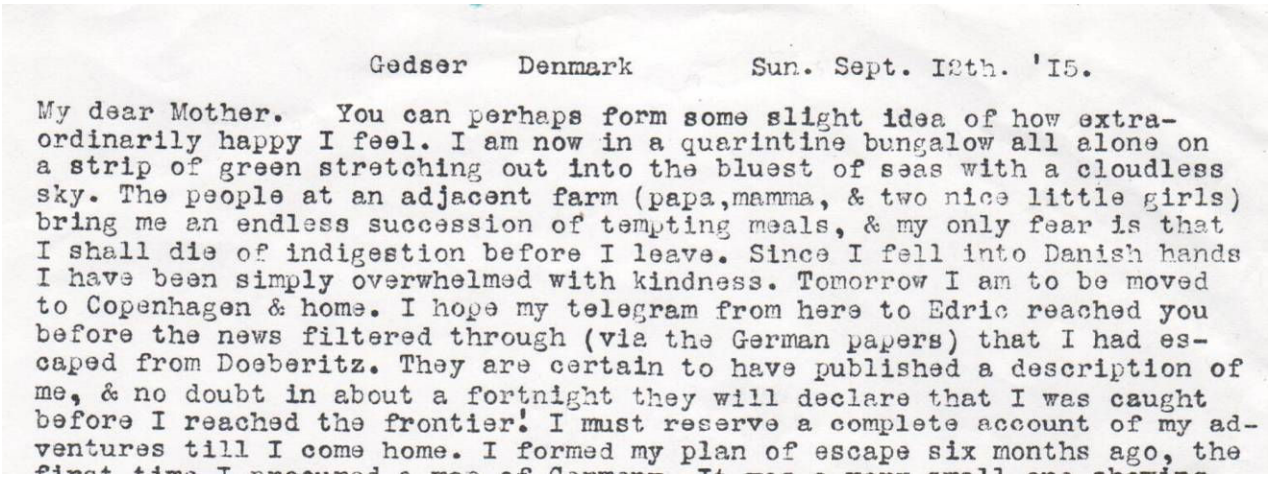
This was the title for a short article in the Danish local newspaper "Naestved Tidende" on the evening of Saturday 11th September 1915. Earlier that day the crew on the steam ferry "Alexandrine" had observed, midway between Wärnemunde and Gedser, a small boat with a man aboard. They took the vessel on board. The man turned out to be an English prisoner of war, who after a year in captivity had escaped from his camp near Berlin and walked to the coast. In Gedser he was handed over to the state police and would be sent home to England.

That was all the information given about the anonymous pow. When I came across a letter that Gilbert Millar had written to his mother, a year after reading the newspaper article, I was in no doubt that I had found the right man. Nearly a century later John, grand nephew of Gilbert, had put the letter on his blog. With the letter came more detail. However, it was after reading the report Gilbert made when safely home in England that it became clear. He described his dangerous and exciting escape, and of reaching a safe haven in Denmark. On closer acquaintance it becomes apparent that no less could have been expected of this intelligent, independent and enterprising young man.



Gedser Denmark Sun. Sept. 12th. '15.

My dear Mother. You can perhaps form some slight idea of how extraordinarily happy I feel. I am now in a quarintine bungalow all alone on a strip of green stretching out into the bluest of seas with a cloudless sky. The people at an adjacent farm (papa,mamma, & two nice little girls) bring me an endless succession of tempting meals, & my only fear is that I shall die of indigestion before I leave. Since I fell into Danish hands I have been simply overwhelmed with kindness. Tomorrow I am to be moved to Copenhagen & home. I hope my telegram from here to Edric reached you before the news filtered through (via the German papers) that I had escaped from Doeberitz. They are certain to have published a description of me, & no doubt in about a fortnight they will declare that I was caught before I reached the frontier! I must reserve a complete account of my adventures till I come home. I formed my plan of escape six months ago, the

Gilbert Henry Millar was born in England in 1884. His middle class family lived in Hampstead Heath. Father, Henry Edward Millar, was a businessman and mother, Ada Margaret, had probably more than enough to see to with their 11 children born between 1880 and 1895. They had the usual number of servants and nannies and the children were brought up and educated to be good solid citizens of Great Britain as it was in the late 20th century. Gilbert was the third of their six sons. Their second son Cecil died aged 13 in 1896, 5 months after the youngest, twin girls Oliver and Violet, were born. The family built a holiday home in the 1890's at Nefyn in Caernarvonshire, Wales. In a field originally owned by the Methodist Chapel their property Caeau Chapel was surrounded by a stone wall to insure privacy. The family loved the solitude and peacefulness here. They had a boathouse at the back of the property were they kept their sailboat. The boys were avid sailors participating in regattas held locally.

Gilbert and his brother Ion were given a fine education at the boarding school Rugby, and he went on to study at Pembroke College, Cambridge. He took a double first in "Mathematical and Mechanical Triposes". From 1907 he worked as an engineer for the London and North Western Railway. He must have been talented for in 1910 he became an employee of the National Physical Laboratory (NPL). This was Great Britain's national measurement standards laboratory for *"standardizing and verifying instruments, for testing materials, and for the determination of physical constants*". It was originally conceived as an extension to Kew Observatory and founded in 1900 with headquarters at Bushy House. At the opening ceremony in 1902 the Prince of Wales explained that the institute's function would be "*to bring scientific knowledge to bear practically upon our everyday industrial and commercial life, to break down the barrier between theory and practice, to effect a union between science and commerce*". It must have been exciting pioneer work they were doing in the newly built centre, where Gilbert was an assistant at the ship's testing pool. The pool was ready for use in 1910, 150m long, 9m wide, with a depth in the middle of 3.75m and containing 5,000 tons of water. Gilbert in his mid 20s and single lived close by in Teddington and one can imagine that NPL was a fantastic playground for the nerdy young man.

The ship's testing pool under construction

Still living at home with their parents, in their big house "Heathdown", were a throng of offspring, now adult sized: according to the 1911 census Gilbert's 4 brothers aged 30, 23, 22, and 18 and three of his sisters 20, 15 and 15. Edric was a civil servant at the Treasury, Ion and Herbert worked as mercantile clerks, while Basil was going to study at Oxford University. The girls are described simply as single with no occupation. It must have been a house full of laughter and activity with a bright and secure future set out for each of them. Daughter Doris Marguerite had married in 1907 and the family was already extended with a couple of grandchildren. The family liked each other's company, was a strong unit, and held long summer holidays together in their coastal property in Wales. But misfortune was just around the corner.

At a visit to their house at Caeau Chapel head of the family, Henry Millar, died. What exactly happened is unclear. The family story goes that the 55 year old fell off a cliff. The probate report noted that Henry Edward Millar was last seen alive on 19th February 1912, but that his body wasn't found

until 6th March, on the shore at Nefyn i.e. near their holiday home. Whatever had happened it must have been painful for the family to lose husband and father in this way. Another death hit the family in August the following year. Gilbert's brother Herbert died aged 24 years, but in a hospital! When the family got together a year later on 14th June 1914 it was for a joyous occasion. Winifred married Dr. Ffrangeon Roberts. The family now over their worst grief must have looked forward to being able to enjoy the long summer that lay ahead without too many concerns.

One can muse over how the news of the outbreak of the war against Germany was taken in the middle-class family with 4 sons and a couple of sons-in-law aged between 22 and mid 30s. Conscription had not been introduced at the time and the men in the family weren't of a military type, for the main part they were businessmen or clergy. There is no doubt that they felt, perhaps among other emotions, a patriotic zeal to do their duty. Ion Keith Millar, Gilbert's brother, younger by 3 years, volunteered straight away joining the 10th Royal Fusiliers. After training they left for France in July 1915. Gilbert's interest clearly lay with the maritime world and the obvious thing for him to do was to join the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR), which he did a few days into the war on the 8th August. In his military documents he is described as having trained as a Civil Engineer in "naval architecture" and with a good knowledge of seamanship and coastal navigation.

So many joined the RNVR, including Prime Minister Asquith's son Arthur, that there weren't enough ships to accommodate them and as Winston's Little Army their first experience of war was on land. Three new Naval Brigades were created with 4 battalions in each, named after fleet cities or famous naval heroes. For Gilbert it wasn't in Drake or Nelson, Plymouth or Portsmouth but with the Benbow Battalion he was to serve, as a signalman. After a couple of months training immediate assistance was required in Antwerp. Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, having himself visited the city in order to assess the situation ordered the operation and the would-be sailors were on the move by train and by foot. Seemingly in great haste as "*80% went without even basic equipment such as packs, mess tins or water bottles and two brigades were armed with ancient charger-loading rifles, just three days before embarking*".

They left Dunkirk and arrived at Antwerp early on 6th October where the siege was well underway. The enemy was successful in their bombardment of the city and the Royal Naval Division retreated during the evening of 8th October. The city surrendered to the Germans on 10th October. 57 British had died while 138 were wounded, but also of importance were the approximately 2500 men from the Naval Battalions who subsequently disappeared from the ranks of the fighting forces. 1500 retreated across the border into Holland where they were interned for the remainder of the war. Gilbert Millar, signalman in RNVR was captured by the Germans.

In a report Gilbert gave to the British authorities a year later he described his capture.

"*About 600 of the Naval Brigade, 300 Marines and 400-500 Belgians, were captured on a train near Moerbecke about 11 p.m. on Oct. 8th 1914, after a short engagement. Considering that the German C.O. and a squad of his men were shot down by a Marine Patrol, who did not know that the detachments had surrendered, the treatment of the prisoners directly after the surrender was very moderate. Prisoners were all searched but not very thoroughly, and money and private property was not taken. They were then marched several miles to a church at Exaarde*. "

On the way to Exaarde a disturbance occurred in which some 10 men of the Naval Division were shot, Gilbert was near the rear of the column and didn't witness it happening. He understood that *" a German patrol behind a hedge mistook the column for armed British troops and fired on them*". It appears however that one of the British prisoners had tried to escape. A German guard fired at him and in the following tumult a number of the pows were shot. Benbow's commanding officer Lieutenant Commander Hanson tried in vain to stop the German guard from firing. This action was to have serious consequences for him. They arrived at the church in the early hours of the 10th and according to Gilbert "*were confined in the greatest discomfort until the next morning. During this period some attempt was made to feed the prisoners with bread and cooked cow, but the amount of food received by each man was almost negligible*." According to another prisoner "*Our stay in the church was very strange, as no one seemed to be able to sleep*". One can understand their exhaustion after the week they had experienced and the concerns they would have had about what would happen in their new situation as prisoners of war. Gilbert doesn't mention the funerals of the prisoners who had been killed and were buried here in Exaarde churchyard or Hanson's fate.

The shooting incident was later reported in The Times "*On October 10 last year, while being marched along in the dark, ill and in a condition of delirium, he (Lieutenant Commander Hanson) imagined that he saw British soldiers approaching. He called out to the visionary troops not to come near as the Germans were there. For this he was condemned by the Germans to be shot, and he was executed the following morning*." In evidence given by Lieutenant-Commander F. C. Grover, Hawke Battalion RNVR, in 1918: *"Poor Hanson was shot by the Germans on the 10th October 1914. He had struggled with a sentry who was about to fire on one of our own men trying to escape after we were taken prisoner on the night of the 9th, and under German Military Code such an act can be punished with death. I tried to get the sentence mitigated, and so did the Commandant of the troops guarding us, for it was evident that Hanson was overwrought by the fatigues of the previous days. The matter was referred to the highest authority; at that time, General von der Goltz was Military Governor of Belgium, but it was of no avail, and Hanson was shot by firing squad at midday, and is buried by the Church at Exaarde"*.

A court of inquiry into “The Moerbeke Affair” contains several references to Lt.Cdr. Hanson's conduct and his distressed state of mind. The conduct of the Naval Brigade ratings also came in for severe criticism. Despite this, the findings of the Court of Inquiry made no mention of Hanson by name, only that the surrender was originally ‘advocated by the Naval Officers’.

Exaarde churchyard

The prisoners left the church at Exaarde at 8 o’clock on 11th October and marched to Termonde railway station which they reached at mid-day. Gilbert reported that “*A stew was then prepared and each man received two small fragments of meat and a sip of gravy before entraining. The prisoners were then placed in closed 4-wheel trucks, about 35 men and 2 guards to each truck, and reached Döberitz in the early morning of the 15th after 4 nights on the railway. During this time two meals were provided in the wooden canteens beside the railway, one a supper of soup, and the other a breakfast of sausages, bread and coffee. Otherwise the only food obtained was a few crusts, and even water was hard to obtain, but as far as is known there was no actual brutality on the part of the guards*”.

The prisoner of war camp at Döberitz was situated 8 km west of Berlin. The German army had taken over the village in 1894 and established a large military establishment there.

Gilbert continues “*On arrival at Döberitz the R.N.D. and Marine Prisoners were placed in the camp. An adjoining camp on the other side of the road was occupied by some 2500 soldiers of the Expeditionary Force, who had arrived in Döberitz (for the most part) some six weeks earlier than the R.N.D. About 1000 French and Belgian prisoners joined the camps soon afterwards and about 5000 Russians at the beginning of November. The conditions of life here were very primitive, the prisoners being housed in tents made from torn canvas stretched on rickety wooden frames with bare earth floor; washing had to be carried out in a horse trough out of doors, and the latrine accommodation (open trenches) was quite inadequate. The food was at first fairly good in quality, though being very watery it had a very bad effect on the health of the prisoners. Later the food degenerated in quality progressively. Canteens were, however, provided, where bread and a few other things could be purchased by those who had any money*.”

On 1st. December the prisoners were moved to another new part of the camp, to 40 wooden huts with 4 buildings containing kitchens and offices and 8 latrines. This camp was not fully completed, but some months later 6 wash houses were built round the hydrants and a fine bath house provided, in which hot and cold shower baths could be obtained. As there were not sufficient huts, several large tents were also erected and subsequently fitted with wooden floors and linings. This work took a long time and during most of the winter the huts were badly crowded, about 100-120 men in a room measuring roughly 30ft. x 30ft. This fine camp area, when finally finished and up and running, was taken over for German recruits later in the year.

Meals issued after April 1915 consisted of breakfast at 5.30 am – a bowl of rice, barley or a sort of oatmeal. Dinner at 12.30 pm – a bowl of soup made of vegetables with occasional fragments of meat, apparently horsemeat or dried fish. Tea 6.0 pm – a bowl of rice, or tea or coffee with bad cheese or tinned herring. Varied food could be bought at the canteen. Margarine could nearly always be obtained and tinned milk occasionally. Artificial honey, sardines, and tinned herrings were generally to be had; and fruit, cucumbers and lettuces during the great part of the summer, the later being very cheap. A problem for them was, after bread regulation came in force on 1st February, that they could no longer buy bread from the canteen and their daily ration had been reduced to 1/5th of a loaf per man and it was of a very bad quality.

Of the camp food Gilbert thought that the porridge for breakfast was of poor quality, the soup improved in quality somewhat during the summer, but could never be called good while the cheese was so bad that he wasn't tempted. The prisoners could receive food parcels from home. Gilbert must have been sent food parcels from his well-to-do caring family. Not least from his sister Olive, now 19 years old, who regarded Gilbert as her favourite brother. Also a prisoner in Döberitz, Petty Officer Alick Picton Warlow, of Collingwood Bn RNVR, received good parcels from his wife. In letters to Camilla, he says that "*bacon and cheese arrive in splendid condition*". He was especially glad for the bread she sent. As early as the spring of 1915 the enterprising Mrs. Picton Warlow was in the process of organizing the Bedford Bread Fund, which was to send fresh white bread to prisoners of war. They were so successful that the British Red Cross took over and established "The Copenhagen Bureau".

With the coming of spring and reasonable conditions in the camp, Gilbert worried about another matter. He wrote a postcard to his mother in April 1915 which appears to be more or less nonsense. He must have arranged with his brother Edric that important messages would be written in code. By taking the first letter from each word it read "*Going to make us work farms, urge Government protest*". Edric understood that Gilbert was alarmed they would be hired out to farmers all over Germany and contacted the Foreign Office. Edric feared this would give rise to bad treatment and problems with communication and receipt of parcels. He was told to send Gilbert's card to the Admiralty marked "Urgent". A week later Edric received a reply from Horace Rumbold explaining that according to the Hague Convention of 1907 "*the State may employ the labour of prisoners of war, other than officers, according to their rank and capacity. The work shall not be excessive and shall have no connection with the operations of the war*". And that "*In view of the foregoing extracts from the convention, I do not see that we could protest against the employment of British prisoners of war in this manner unless such employment meant their being scattered throughout the country in such a way as to make it impossible for the Americans to satisfy themselves that the prisoners were being properly treated. It seems to me that it would be a mistake to take this up officially because we*

have not been told either officially or privately by the Americans that such an idea is under contemplation and we do not want to put the idea into the heads of the Germans if it is not there already."

Döberitz was under the charge of Commandant Colonel Alberti who according to Gilbert " *on the whole did his best for the prisoners*". The work done by the prisoners was labouring, such as cutting down trees and carting them home, cleaning out stables, various digging work and doing various manual tasks in the camp such as carrying heavy objects. A regular day's work was 9 hours and "*sometimes the work was quite pleasant, and if the guards were good it often happened that hardly any work was done all day*". They didn't work on Sundays. The "farming" system that Gilbert was so concerned about came into being. Volunteers were called for but none were forthcoming. The prisoner's NCOs were ordered to find the number of men required and subsequently parties were sent out to farms and later on to factories. These men were well fed and housed and paid more than the others in camp but had to work 12 hours a day.

Gilbert does not appear to have been sent to do farm work or been punished either. In his report he described the use of various punishments such as "tying up" to a pole, flogging, the cells, and holding back letters and parcels. If only the Germans had known that the quiet, polite and neat signalman had been sending messages home in code and taking a great interest in everything happening around him especially what was going on in the German army training camp which lay next to the pow camp. He was able to draw a detailed map of the camps and their surroundings and give a detailed account of the flow of recruits and the training going on in the German camp and about the small airfield and their selection of aeroplanes. He must also have been able to chat to anybody and everybody and put them at ease. He gleaned an amazing amount of information which he analyzed and every snippet was of use for him to build up a picture of the Germany that surrounded him.

During the first months Gilbert was at Döberitz he was convinced that there wasn't any prospect of escape. However, some time later when he realized that the war wasn't going to end any time soon he reconsidered his position. 4 Russians outside the camp on a day's work in December had escaped. They travelled 60 km before abandoning their attempt and rejoining the same work party 4 days later. They were let off easy but after this security was tightened and pows in working parties were carefully counted. During the summer a considerable number of Russians escaped from farms to which they had been sent. Getting away wasn't difficult, however they were poorly equipped and in 19 out of 20 cases were caught

before they got any distance. The usual punishment was to be tied to a tree for three hours with a board over their heads bearing the word DESERTER followed by a period in the cells. These Russians had all escaped in uniform as they were afraid otherwise of being shot as spies if caught.

Gilbert had obtained a German war atlas through a Russian civilian prisoner in February. It was very small scale and Germany was only marked with military towns and important rivers. However on looking at it he at once decided on a route that he felt offered the best chance of success and which he ultimately followed. "*In the matter of distance it was by far the shortest, and I considered that the chance of finding a boat on the Baltic coast and getting clear was considerably greater than that of crossing a frontier carefully guarded by concealed sentries. Once at sea and outside the coast patrols I ought to have at least an even chance to complete the passage unobserved*." He decided to make the attempt alone as he did not wish to have the responsibility of persuading a friend to risk his life; further the few friends to whom he told his route had no confidence in it. Gilbert himself was quietly confident that if he got to the coast and the weather held, and having the considerable experience with small boats he had, he could manage the crossing. He did acknowledge however that he might find a suitable boat and not be able to launch her without help. The best time of year to attempt escape was in March or September, preferably the latter with warmer weather and fruit procurable. The best time of the month, with dark nights, was 4 or 5 days before the new moon. Gilbert decided to walk all the way. He had started to learn German in the camp but felt it was too risky to travel by train, which would also have necessitated a pass. Gilbert's plan was made. From then on he collected necessary items and equipment until the right occasion should arise.

In Gilbert's own words the principle difficulty was to get away.

"*It would often be quite easy to slip off whilst out at work, but one never knew beforehand what the work would be on any particular day and it would be impossible to take out to work all the necessary equipment without exciting suspicion: moreover one would have been missed as soon as the party assembled to go back to camp. It was therefore almost a necessity to break out of the camp after dark, but this seemed a hopeless undertaking, the camp being surrounded by two formidable barbed wire fences with sentries in between, and brilliant electric lights.*

Fortunately just at the right time the camp was broken up, most of the prisoners being sent to Dyrotz except about a thousand who were retained at Döberitz and sent to the old disused prisoner's camp. I was among this thousand, and was also one of the first batch to be shifted. The shifting process began on a Monday and was to finish on the following Saturday: during this period guards were kept on both camps, and only five guards were posted round the camp into which we were being moved. The fencing was at that time only a single line most of the way round, and only a part of it was of wire mesh. I therefore completed my preparations with all speed and broke out on the Friday night, the last possible night.

Three very necessary articles were a map, a flash-lamp, and a compass. The map caused me some trouble. I made unsuccessful attempts to get one all summer, but eventually managed to borrow a very good one from a friend who had obtained it some months previously: it was to a small scale (about 15 miles to the inch) but showed all the more important places, and the number of inhabitants of most of these, and all the rivers and the railways. I traced off the part I wanted on a thin piece of paper. I obtained a very poor compass during the summer from a Russian who had escaped but who had been caught, and less than a week before I started I managed to get a better compass and a flash-lamp. These were obtained indirectly

through a German civilian. I also tried to obtain a pair of cutting pliers but without success: fortunately I did not need them and was thus saved carrying an unnecessary weight. I also ordered some white oil paint to whiten my hair at the sides, but did not get it in time. I also required a rucksack (such as is carried by many German workmen) in which to carry my gear. There were several in the camp but I did not success in buying one, and in the end I made one during the last few days out of a canvas kit-bag which I possessed.

I actually escaped in the clothes that I had been wearing in the camp for some time: I wore an old pair of black trousers (prison uniform supplied by the Germans with the yellow stripes removed), a blue jersey and a brown cardigan jacket: also an old pair of Navy gaiters, which I blackened and usually wore under my trousers when passing people. I wore plenty of underclothing, and took a light overcoat of dark green colour. I carried with me: black silk scarf, woollen scarf, felt hat, spare pair of socks, knife, pencil, scissors, safety-razor, shaving brush, soap, boot-blacking and brush, hair-comb, nail-brush (for clothes-brush), vaseline and borac powder (for my feet), two compasses, map, electric flash-light, pocket mirror, 2 boxes of matches, needles and thread, 3 handkerchiefs, towel, boot-laces, string and wire, beer-bottle (for water), 2 one-pound tins of Plasmon biscuits, small piece of cheese, 2 small packets of chocolate and some meat lozenges. The last named were useless, being too thirst producing, water being always difficult to procure; after the first bottle was finished it had to be taken from streams or ponds, but of course I avoided water which tasted bad or was near a house.

I was in complete ignorance of the nature of the country to be traversed and of the particular piece of coast aimed at, but found both very favourable. I was of course largely dependent on the weather, but fortunately it was fine throughout except for the second night and day when it rained heavily. On most nights it was clear so that I could steer and tell the time by the stars, a great advantage.

Another account Gilbert gave about his escape, Friday 3rd to Friday 10th September 1915 ends:

Of the two skiffs I chose the one highest up the beach, as having the smaller beam, but being very tired as usual I had great difficulty in launching her. She was about 12 feet long, and rather leaky, but the thoughtful owner had left a bailer in her. I got afloat at 1.30 a.m., and set a course about N.30W (true) for Gedser, steering by the stars till daylight. I had not intended to start so late in the night, but the weather was ideal with only a light Wly. breeze, and having left tracks so close behind me it seemed much more risky to wait till the following night. The distance to Gedser was 22 sea miles, so there was no time to lose and I pulled steadily and hard till it was light. There were 5 small patrol boats off the coast, and a ship's searchlight could be seen sometimes away to the N.30W. The patrol ships, which carried the usual lights, described a series of overlapping ovals, going about 6 miles out to sea, but I managed to get past unnoticed. At daybreak they were all out of sight, as was the hated Deutschland.

Two small tramps were crossing my bows and I had a little breakfast while I let them go by. Soon I saw the train-ferry coming out of Warnemünde followed by another steamer, and I realized that she would come rather close to me. Whilst at Döberitz I had tried to get hold of a German time-table to find out whether the boats on this route were German or Danish, but failed to get one. I took this boat for a Dane owing to her gay colours. I hailed her skipper, and after receiving his assurances that she was a Danish ship and bound for Gedser, I requested him to take me on board, telling him that I was an escaped British prisoner. He at once consented and I was soon on deck, and the skiff hauled up after me. This was just half way across at 6.15am. There was only a goods train on board and no passengers, and I was accorded a most hearty

welcome. The second steamer, which passed us while I was being taken on board, turned out to be a German train-ferry running on the same route. On arrival at Gedser the skiff was sent over to the German boat with compliments and thanks, and I was taken charge of by the police. I spent two days in a quarantine bungalow at Gedser and was then taken to Copenhagen and kept for four days in the Oresunds hospital, after which I was released and repaired to the British Consul, who fitted me out and sent me home, via Bergen. I reached Newcastle on the 23rd.

On Sunday 12 September, safe in Denmark Gilbert wrote the letter to his mother. She together with his siblings must have been just as extraordinarily happy as he was to hear that he had reached Denmark without mishap. "*Owing to my scanty rations it seemed very hard work, especially across country, and judging by my appearance when I reached Gedser I must have lost nearly two stones on the way. Otherwise it had no effect on me*". He reckoned afterwards that the route he took "*owing to unavoidable and accidental detours*" had been approximately 190 miles. Gilbert spent a couple of days in Gedser in quarantine and as mentioned a note about him appeared in the local paper. A week later, 3 more escaping prisoners of war were taken up by the Warnemunde- Gedser ferry. This time it was 3 Russians who had been in a prison camp near Stralsund. They too were mentioned in the newspaper, this time with a photo. Unfortunately the local history archive in Gedser doesn't have any information about Gilbert.

The rest of Gilbert's letter

ventures till I come home. I formed my plan of escape six months ago, the first time I procured a map of Germeny. It was a very small one showing only the miltary posts & more important rivers, but it struck me at once that the thing to do was to make due north to the sea, steal a rowing-boat & row across here, which is exactly what I did. We were shifted from the new camp at Doeberitz (about I000 or I500 English, French & Belgians) back to our old original camp, while the rest of the prisoners were sent off to another camp at Dyrotz (5-7miles away). The moving process lasted from Monday to Saturday, & during this period there were only 4 or 5 sentries posted round the old camp, the usual number remaining round the old one. I was in the first lot to move (on Monday) & hastily completed my preparati & broke out of camp at 8.45 p.m. on Friday Sept. 3rd, carring my gear (about I0 lbs) in a little rucksack I had made. I got I5 miles across country during the night, and afterwards marching by night & sleeping in the woods by day I reached the coast in 7 nights, being seen by no one except a few peasants. I had several narrow escapes of course but I shaved off my moustache & beard the first morning & passed for a workman all right. On Friday night last (I0th) I struck the shore just east of Waremunde, & found a low sandy shore backed by woods, along which I walked for some 7 or 8 miles till I finally found two small skiffs & after half an hours search found a pair of sculls & rowlocks under a house near by, launched the smallest boat with my last ounce of strength & set off at I.30 a.m. for Gedser, beautiful fine night & smooth sea. There were 5 guardships cruising off the coast but my luck held to the end, & though they made circles all round me I got clear through & at 6.I5 a. m., when half way across (it is about 25 miles) I was picked up by the Danish train ferry steamer & brought in here. A German ferry boat was 400 yards astern at the time! It was the hardest week's work that I have ever had but well worth it. When I stripped for a wash on the steamer I found I had lost nearly all my flesh, having had to live on 6 Plasmon biscuits a day, and pears & plums which I stole en route. I am now absolutely well though - the doctor examined me yesterday. I look forward immensely to seeing you again. Afraid I shall be quarantined again I get to England but should see you within a month from now, perhaps sooner

Your loving son, Gilbert H. Millar.

Berliner Tageblatt printed an article about Gilbert's escape which several English newspapers translated and in a summary from 20th September stated *"... a wonderful marine performance stands to the credit of a nameless Englishman, who recently broke war prison in Germany and successfully voyaged to a haven of refuge in Denmark*".

SIGNALMAN'S ESCAPE FROM DOBERITZ.

LONDONER'S 180 MILES WALK TO THE BALTIC.

Gilbert H. Millar, signaller, R.N.V.R.,

Very few British prisoners of war escaped from Germany to Denmark: Gilbert was the first. Of his experiences in Denmark he wrote "*All the Danes with whom I came in contact treated me with extraordinary kindness, and I was quite astonished to find how warm were the feelings of the Danes towards the British*". Gilbert was back in England a couple of weeks later. He provided the reports mentioned on 29th September; about his capture, about his time at the prisoner of war camp at Döberitz, about the German military camp at Döberitz including detailed map and about his escape. On the cover is noted "*This is a very good report, and from the manner of his escape Mr. Millar appears to possess great resource and general capabilities of a high order*". Copies were sent to the Foreign Office, War Office and Commander-in-chief Home Fleets. A month later, at home at Heathdown, Gilbert received a letter "*My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty have perused with much interest the report prepared by you on the Prisoner Camp at Döberitz, and I am to convey to you their appreciation of the ability displayed in its compilation and of the close observation and resource which alone can have enabled you to collect the necessary data.*"

Gilbert's return must have been celebrated at Heathdown with great joy and emotion by family and friends. Ion who had been fighting in France since July was also back in England in October. The brothers had both shown their capabilities. Ion took up a commission in the East Surrey Regiment while Gilbert was commissioned in the R.N.V.R. and seconded for air duties on 28th October. The Royal Naval Air Service was at that time separate from the army's Royal Flying Corps. Roughly speaking the RFC served at the front while RNAS protected the home country and shipping from land bases in U.K., from attack by zeppelins and submarines. Both Millar brothers spent the next many months in training before they could again return to active war service. Their youngest sisters, twins Violet and Olive were busy too. Violet worked throughout the war as a VAD in a convalescence home. Olive studied at Cambridge.

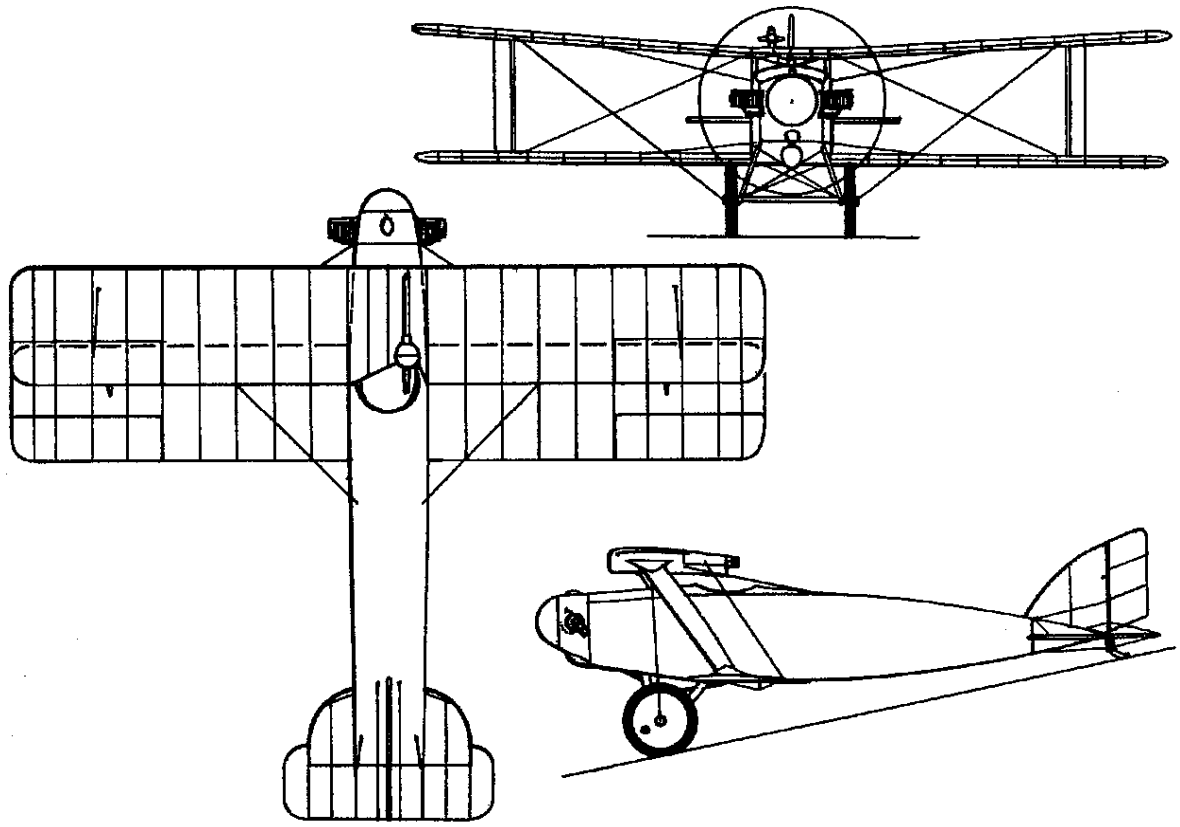
It must have been wonderful for Gilbert after a year in tedious captivity to be back in England and training as a pilot. At the time this meant 5 weeks of training and having done at least 15 hours flying solo to gain a pilot's certificate. Gilbert took his test on 15th March 1916 in a Maurice Farman Biplane at the RNAS training camp at Eastbourne. The photo of Lieutenant Gilbert Henry Millar comes from the Royal Aero Club Aviators' Certificates album. From Eastbourne he went to Calshot Naval Air Station where they provided anti-submarine and convoy protection in the Channel and were also a training station for seaplanes and flying boats. Gilbert took a second pilot certificate at Cranwell, another RNAS training centre, in May having

flown a variety of planes e.g. Farman, Curtiss, Bleriot and Avro and Short seaplanes. One can imagine that Gilbert enjoyed this period of his life but a fact is that during those months more pilots were killed under training than in active war service.

Ion finished his training in May and returned to France as an officer. The Battle of the Somme raged between 1st. July and 18th November 1916 and was the bloodiest in the war. During the first day the British suffered almost 60,000 casualties i.e. killed, wounded or taken prisoner. It was to this hell Ion was sent and where he lived the last weeks of his life. He was killed on 29th July, 29 years old. "*While leading the first line in an attack on a German machine-gun position near the Delville Wood on the Somme Front, he was instantly killed. He was buried at night where he fell, between the two lines*". His Commanding Officer wrote "*He was killed while leading his men with the most conspicuous gallantry. The regiment has lost a very brave young Officer who was beloved by his men and who, had he been spared, would have rendered invaluable service*". Ion is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial along with 72,000 British and South Africans with no known grave, after the Somme battles between July 1916 and March 1918.


Ion Keith Millar

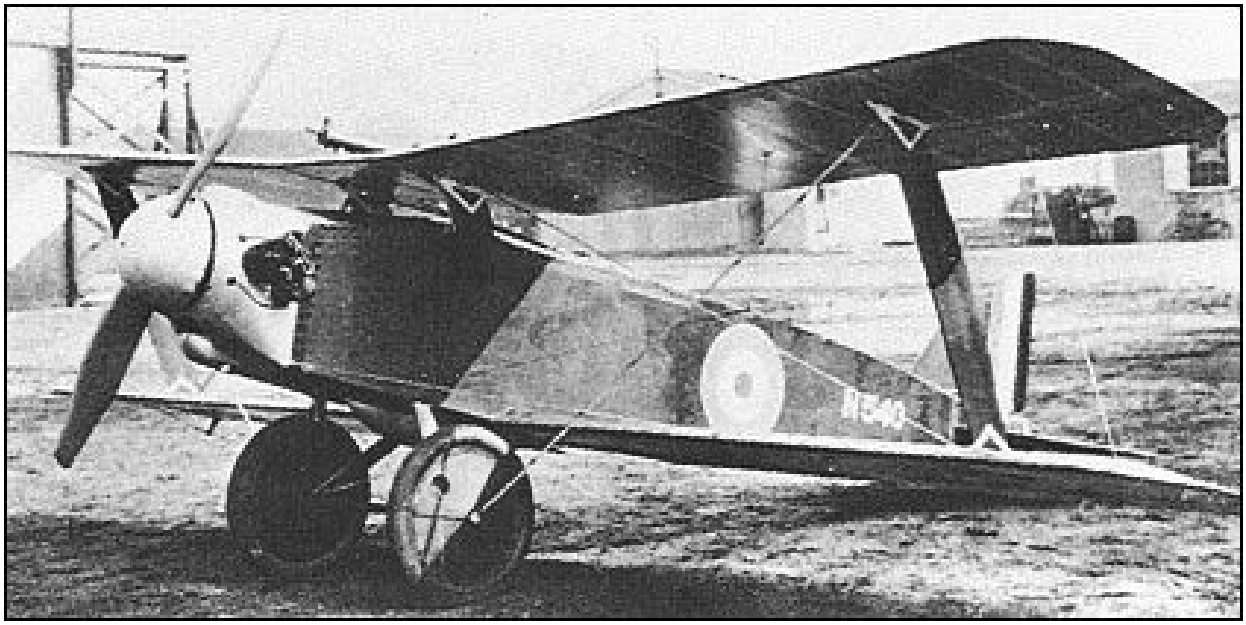
It must have been the news the family had feared the most which was now a reality. A dreadful loss, but life had to go on. Olive's sweetheart was back in England after the Battle of Jutland: Algernon Willis, son of the Millar parents' friends and also from Hampstead Heath. He was in the Navy as a profession and his next posting was to HMS Vernon Portsmouth, a training centre for torpedo and other anti-submarine equipment. Olive and Algernon were married on 2nd October at Christ Church, Hampstead, he was 27 she was 20. The wedding was probably a quiet celebration, in respect for Ion's recent death, but one can imagine that Olive wanted Gilbert to attend. He certainly wasn't far away, on the Isle of Sheppey. For Gilbert had been serving at the RNAS Experimental Flight at Eastchurch since August.



Aeroplanes had already proven their worth performing a variety of tasks during the war but the technology was in its infancy and improvements in all aspects including flight safety for the pilot were urgently needed. A specific request from the Navy in 1916 was for "*A small single seater fighter landplane intended to fly off short platforms on the forecastle of the Royal Navy 's destroyers and other small ships to provide a widely distributed airship interceptor*". Gilbert, chief technical officer, was put to the task and developed a prototype, named the Eastchurch Kitten. The head of Eastchurch, Australian Commander Harry Busteed was then posted in March 1917 to the nearby Marine Aircraft Experimental Department at Port Victoria on the Isle of Grain taking Gilbert and the part built Kitten with him. Here they had been working on their own similar, competing, aircraft which became known as the Grain Kitten or P.V.7. Gilbert's machine, the Eastchurch Kitten became the P.V.8.

The P.V.7 was tested in flight in June 1917. The P.V.8 flew for the first time on 7th September. The Eastchurch Kitten/P.V.8 was "pocket sized": only 4.76 m long with a wingspan of 5.78 m and an empty

weight of 155 kg. It was crewed by one and a Lewis gun was to be mounted on the top wing. For the test flight the plane was powered by a 35hp ungeared engine and had a maximum speed of 152 km/hour. The official testing praised the view for the pilot and its handling but considered the aircraft too fragile for regular use. Modifications were made but the Gnat engine used was very unreliable. The Eastchurch Kitten prototype was packed down to send to America for further development. Gilbert didn't take part in the trials on his plane on the Isle of Grain for he had moved on to, or rather back to, Eastchurch where he passed an Observer course in July. And then to Scotland.



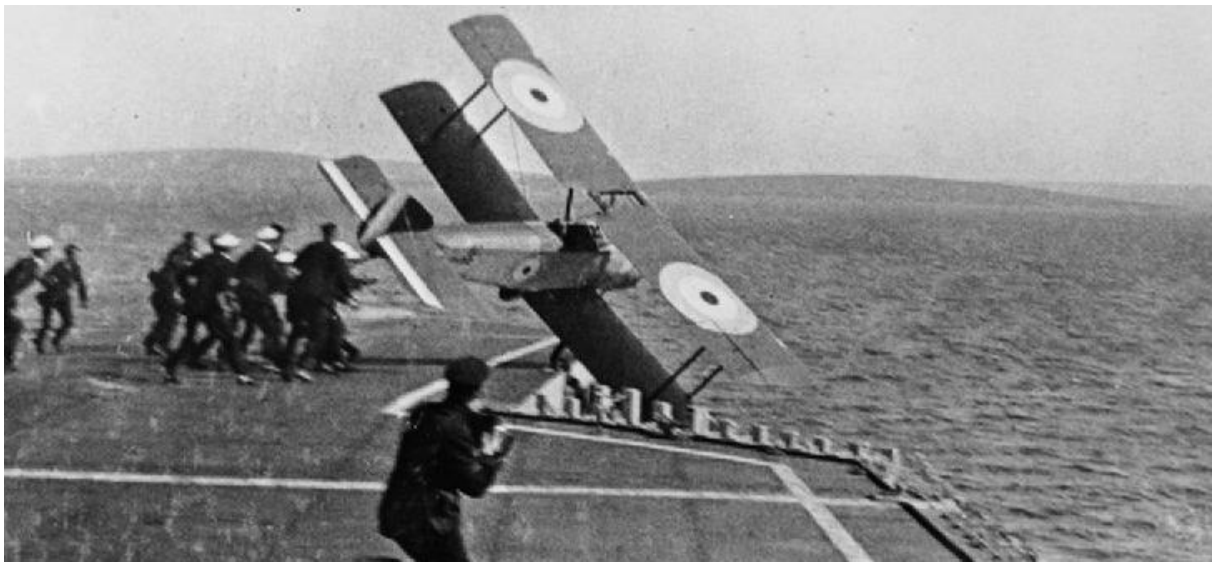
Eastchurch kitten

Gilbert was posted on the 25th July to the newly built and modified "HMS Furious". This large warship had been fitted to carry four two-seater reconnaissance seaplanes and four single-seater fighters. A large new seaplane hangar was built together with a flying-off platform 76m in length and 17m wide. The ship had a crew of 796 men plus 14 officer and 70 ratings of the RNAS under Squadron Commander Dunning. HMS Furious joined the Fleet at Scarpa Flow on 5th. July and Gilbert arrived 10 days later. On board were 3 Short 184s, seaplanes, and 5 Sopwith Pups. Up until this time the pilots had been able to take off from ships, but had been unable to land on them. They had had to fly back to land or ditch the plane in the sea. The Sopwith Pups required only 6 m to take off and were fitted with buoys so they could stay afloat until the crew on ship could hoist them onboard.

19 year old Jack McCleery, a pilot colleague of Gilbert's on the Furious, kept a diary, wrote many letters home and took a lot of photos. To his mother he explained "*I'm afraid I'll not be able to say much as there's nothing of any interest that I may tell you*". All the excitement of patrols and their experiments with take-off and landing were secret. They were kept busy but the pilots and observers had time to picnic ashore on the islands cooking sausages over an open fire or visiting the locals in their crofts staying for tea and homemade delicacies. Jack wanted his mother to arrange for his dirty linen to be sent to the laundry as they had no means of doing it on board. He also wanted his mother to knit him a Balaclava helmet in blue,

a fairly tight fit as it shouldn't be sloppy. Being on a ship was a whole new world for Jack and he found sleeping in a hammock took some getting used to.

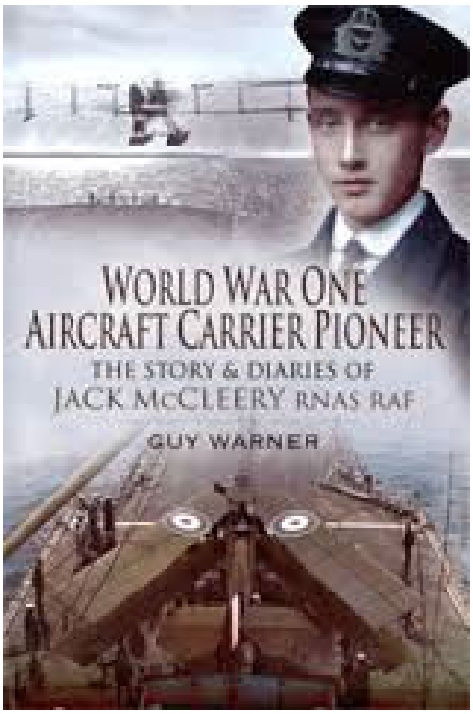
Squadron Commander Dunning attempted to land a Sopwith Pup on the Furious on 2nd August 1917 and succeeded. This was the first plane landing on a sailing ship ever. It was a fantastic achievement, and something they had been working towards for a long time. 5 days later Dunning wanted to repeat his success and once again it went well. He went straight over to another Pup and tried for a third time. Suddenly the motor stalled and the plane went over the side on landing. Despite help at hand from all sides it took them 30 minutes to get Dunning out of the plane. He appears to have hit his head and been unconscious and had drowned. The pilots wrote to the Admiralty about their concerns over further testing. Lt. W.G. Moore who temporarily took command after Dunning's death wrote "*They just dropped on the deck like shot partridges*". Fortunately with no more deaths or serious injuries. In another short note Moore wrote to a senior officer "*I beg to submit that, with training, any good pilot can land on the Furious flying-off deck. But I estimate that the life of a pilot will be approximately ten flights*." Their attempts were stopped until further notice. Furious returned to Rosyth and this was her base for the rest of the war.



Dunning's accident

Jack McCleery witnessed Dunning's death, and Gilbert probably did too. Jack wrote to his parents "*We've had a very unfortunate week of it and I'm very glad it's over. I can't tell you why of course*". In his diary he wrote "*..he was dead when we got him: horrible sight. He must have been stunned, when he hit the water, by the cross bar, as his belt was fastened. Machine badly smashed*." It was dangerous every time they flew. Jack wrote in his diary of all the accidents that occurred, deaths and casualties among friends and acquaintances he had made during his time in RNAS. They are noted but he seems not affected. One wonders if it was a defence mechanism against the fear that would take over if he allowed himself to be moved. At one point in September when Jack was unable to fly because of bad weather he wrote home" *I'm afraid I'm beginning (and also another of my lot) to get touches of nerves – not on account of too much of my work, but the very opposite. It's a common complaint in this particular branch and there's only one cure – more of the business or else leave and that's most unlikely*". It was necessary to get the adrenalin kick of flying almost daily to keep the anxiety at bay. Jack flew again. Furious was part of the Grand Fleet and

patrolled the North Sea for airships and submarines. For example on 17th October they were hunting for two German light cruisers that had attacked a convoy en route from UK to Scandinavia. They had sunk nine of the twelve merchant ships and the two British destroyers that had been escorting them. 250 had been killed and 50 wounded. The crews of the two Danish vessels, Stella and Margrethe were all rescued.



It is a shame that Gilbert didn't write a diary, especially knowing how well he wrote and of his skill in observation and description. With Jack on the Furious we are as close as we otherwise can be, for Gilbert is mentioned several times. They flew together on the 19th September; Jack was pilot while Gilbert was observer, *"Had to go up in a Short 1630 with Lieutenant Miller. Stayed up about 40 minutes and then came down as it was extremely bumpy*"(sic). Later on Sunday 23rd. " *Had to take a Sunbeam Short to Engadine – taxied as engine was popping very badly. Took Lieutenant Miller as passenger*". They lunched on ship and then walked from Rosyth to Charlestown, about 7 miles and had tea in a hotel. Jack wrote of the concerts they arranged and other entertainment on board Furious. They had a very good gramophone in the gunroom which was getting plenty of use and several of the guys played instruments. Jack went to Edinburgh quite frequently and often ended up at the cinema. Gilbert probably spent his spare time with similar diversions.

From July to November 1917 Furious had sailed 5500 miles, including 1000 miles sailed during the incident mentioned between 16-18 October. On 15th November HMS Furious was back in Newcastle for further alterations that were to take months. Jack was the last of the pilots on board and had to complete various tasks before he got a fortnight's leave. Gilbert probably travelled home to his family in Hampstead Heath to visit and relax. They kept the pilot/observer team together. They were subsequently stationed at East Fortune, another RNAS base in Scotland. They were billeted nearby and according to Jack the digs were very comfy and they were well looked after.

Jack wanted to go home for Christmas but leave wasn't given. Tuesday 18th December " *Wasn't up for a decent trip in the morning – only 15 minutes. Went to Portobello and had awful trip back – bumps, clouds etc. Was scared stiff, and very glad to get back OK*". Christmas Day he wrote "*Stayed in Dunbar all day; rainy at first but fine later, went for a walk in the morning and to tea with Observer Lieutenant Miller. Chicken and plum pudding for dinner! Would have been much happier flying though*". So Gilbert had a fine Christmas dinner and was in good company. Although Jack was 19 and Gilbert was 33 it appears that they got on well together. Monday 14th January " *Very cold day and I didn't go up at all. Went and had 1½ hours skating on a pond with Miller and Dickson. Ice about four inches thick. Got on all right for me! Nothing much doing. F/S-L Price nearly knocked his innards out in a crash in a Pup, by being thrown against Vickers cocking handle. 30 degrees of frost tonight! The three of us went to Smith's tonight and had a jolly good time playing bagatelle and the piano. Also Smith telling yarns of the Stock Exchange*".

Film of landing trials probably on Isle of Grain http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060023160

On 4th February Jack noted "*Priceless day, but rather windy and so had only one flight. Doing wireless with Miller. Rather unpleasantly bumpy up topsides*". Towards the end of February the message was that Furious would be ready in a month's time and they would all get 4 or 5 days leave before embarkation. They were also to go to down to the Marine Aircraft Experimental Department on the Isle of Grain for a week's training. The pilots had trained precision landing while they had been at East Fortune. Meanwhile at the Isle of Grain they continued their experiments on modifying aircraft for landing on ships. The pilots were to train with the new equipment and techniques. Furious was back in Rosyth in mid March, now with 10 Sopwith Pups and 14 Sopwith 1½ Strutters on board. Not only refitted, the ship had also been repainted with a dazzle design. Cmdr. Harry Busteed with whom Gilbert had worked on the Eastchurch Kitten, left the Isle of Grain to attempt for himself landing on the Furious. Jack wrote about Busteed " *Landed much too fast, deleted machine and cut nose badly*." It was his nose and not the plane's. It was still extremely difficult and highly dangerous even for a very experienced pilot.

HMS Furious

A couple of replacements appeared in the pilot team. A young pilot Toby Yeulett took up his posting on 14th January. Another was Henry Frank Mears. This young man had grown up with sporting excitement at hand. His father and uncle built the football stadium Stamford Bridge and owned Chelsea Football Club. He joined up a month after he turned 18. Now a year later Frank was referred to as " *a very good flyer*". The young men had joined the Royal Naval Air Service. On 1st. April the RNAS merged with the Royal Flying Corps. This had no immediate effect on Gilbert and his colleges, except according to Jack that there wasn't as much prestige in it and they should have different uniforms. Despite the refitting of the ship, modifications to the planes and new landing techniques, it still proved too dangerous to land on board ship and further attempts were cancelled for the time being. Instead the pilots painted their planes in the hope that it would make them more visible when they ditched in the sea and had to be found to be hauled up. Jack painted his plane in horizontal stripes 20cms wide in blue and red. He was pleased with the result and thought the other planes looked good too.

On Wednesday 24th April the Grand Fleet were alerted and sailed with "*31 battleships, 4 battle cruisers, 24 light cruisers and 85 destroyers*" out of Rosyth hoping to confront the German High Seas Fleet. It would have looked fantastic had it not been for thick fog. The crews were ready for battle, it was now or never. However the Germans were already headed for home. And as it turned out that was the last opportunity during the First World War for the two fleets to have met. The next day the weather was beautiful when

Furious returned to Rosyth. Nerves had been stretched as they sailed through a minefield. Back on Friday Jack received a parcel of goodies from his mother and along with 4 of the other young pilots ate a very good dinner. The weather on Sunday 28th April was fine but windy.

"Monday, 29 April.

Very nice day, but a good deal of wind; 1½ hrs notice. Observer Lieut. Miller and F/S-L Mears killed at Donibristle in a 1½ Strutter crash. Mears was one of the best chaps imaginable and Miller a very fine maths and theoretical man. Both a great loss to the Squadron. Arranged a rough house in the gunroom after dinner to try and buck up the younger pilots and observers. It seemed rather callous but was the best thing to do in my opinion."

"Tuesday, 30 April.

Very windy day, Reverted to four hours' notice about 11 o'clock. Had to go to RN Hospital, South Queensferry, in the afternoon in staff motor boat, calling and delivering telegrams at HMS Lion. Had to get all details re procedure for funerals. They were both fearfully smashed up. Caused by stalling on a climbing turn to left. Machine hit ground from 200 feet on her nose with full engine. It must have been awful to have to get them out. Mears was such a fine young chap."

"Thursday, 2 May.

Went ashore with funeral party to Dunfermline. Acted as pall bearer. Miller only was buried up here; Mears went home. After lunch ship got under way and did full calibre firing – shooting poor."

Donibristle was another RNAS airfield by the Firth of Forth. Jack must have spoken to people who saw what happened. According to one source the plane "*lost speed turning sharply in gusty wind and crashed*". Gilbert was buried at Dunfermline Cemetery three days later on 2nd May. This cemetery has in all 100 military graves from the First World War. Apart from Jack acting as pall bearer nothing is known about the funeral. Did Jack phone Gilbert's and Frank's families to hear of their wishes regarding their funeral s or had they already written their wishes were they to die on home ground? War causalities were buried in cemeteries as near as possible to where they fell. Was Gilbert's family given the choice to travel to Scotland to be present at the funeral? Frank Mears body was "taken home" and buried in Brompton Cemetery next to his father. Both men got a personal family headstone so neither Gilbert or Frank has a Commonwealth War Grave headstone. It appears that Gilbert had been promoted to Captain in the RAF just before his death. Gilbert is also remembered on a wall epitaph at the National Physical Laboratory, Bushy House. Mrs. Mears sorely missed her young son, as seen in a newspaper memorial from 1941.

IN MEMORIAM

"THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE"

MEARS.—In loving memory of my dear son FRANK, killed April 29, 1918, aged 18 years. Sadly missed.—Mother. D.T. 29-4-1941

The pilots and observers were back at work on the Furious a few hours after Gilbert's funeral. New attempts were made at a deck landing whilst Furious was sailing. 13 landings were registered of which only 3 succeeded without damaging the airplane. Once again they reverted to having to land on land or ditching their planes. Their focus was switched to training for an attack on the zeppelin base at Tonder. A previous attempt in 1916 had been unsuccessful. Second time round the action took place on July 19, 1918 and was the first ever successful air raid launched from an aircraft carrier. Furious was escorted by 17 smaller warships. They had planned for the day before but a violent thunderstorm prevented them from flying. 80 miles northwest of their target 7 pilots took off in Sopwith Camels in two flights. Each aircraft carried 2x 50 lb. bombs on racks below the cockpit. The two airship sheds were hit and the base at Tonder ceased to function as a result of the attack.

One of the pilots had returned before the attack because of engine trouble, ditched and was taken up. 3 landed safely in Denmark while the body of 19 year old Toby Yuelett washed up on the beach at Ringkobing Fjord nine days later. He was buried at Harvig cemetery. The 3 lucky pilots escaped from Denmark back to England within a few weeks. Dickon and Smart tried to find their way back to Furious and her escort. Both ran out of fuel and had to ditch their planes at 5.55. and 6.30 respectively. The fleet waited the allotted time based on the planes' fuel capacity and turned for home when they hadn't turned up at 7. Fortunately they were taken up by a Danish fishing boat and turned over to a British vessel. Captain Charles Cabry Dix, naval attaché in Copenhagen went to Lemvig and "*presented watches to some fishermen who had helped some of our flying men who had recently attacked Tondern Zeppelin sheds and burned two Zeppelins inside them.*" A few months later the war ended.

Prisoners of war, including Gilbert's former comrades who were captured in October 1914, were to go home after four years captivity. For those still in Döberitz at the armistice they had to wait a bit longer. The men from this camp were finally sent back home via Copenhagen where they spent a few days before sailing to Leith in mid December on the Plassey and the Ajax. In Copenhagen they would have been able to see British warships in the harbour. These vessels attracted many curious visitors. Especially HMS Caledon, rebuilt with a landing platform caused great interest and the Danes were very impressed by the British pilots showing off their flying skills. The text to a photo in the paper "A plane from the British aircraft carrier is constantly circling between the ships and over the crowds at a low altitude, while the Danish airplanes keep their height.


Solskinsbillede fra Langelinje i Gaar.

Edric continued to work as a civil servant after the war and didn't marry, and is remembered by family members as a very gentle tall man who collected stamps. Basil, a vicar, married Janet Smith a week before the anniversary of Gilbert's death in April 1919. Basil died, 37 years old, in 1930 leaving his wife and 3 children. Muriel Millar aged 26, married Frederick Hungerford Crawshay in April 1920. The twin sisters Olive and Violet both had remarkable lives. In September 1921 Edric was to go on holiday with a friend to Italy. He asked if his mother and sister might accompany them. This wasn't a problem and so it was that Clement Attlee, later Prime Minister, met his wife Violet Millar. They married 3 months later. Violet who had joined the Red Cross in 1915 and worked as a VAD had a lifelong involvement with this organization. Olive too, married in 1916 to Algernon Willis, had a husband with a demanding career. The couple had two daughters. Olive had a breakdown when Algernon was posted away for four years which led to 16 years estrangement. With the prospect of a new world war they got back together. Algernon Willis' distinguished career in the Navy led him to become Second Sea Lord in 1944 and Commander-in-Chief for Mediterranean, Portsmouth in 1948. It appears that having Violet as sister-in-law prevented his appointment as First Sea Lord, as it might have looked like nepotism. Lady Willis, Olive, received a CBE in 1951 for services to the welfare of wives and families of Officers and ratings in the Royal Navy.

Clement Attlee and Violet Millar

Gilbert left funds to three charities in his will. *"£300 is left to the Warspite Training ship and £100 each to the National Lifeboat Institution and the Merchant Seamen's Orphanage*". It was Gilbert's sister Olive who inherited his desk now passed on to her grandson John. From Gilbert's reports he was clearly an observant and an articulate writer so what could be more appropriate than that it is at his desk John works on his blog. From this spot sharing Gilbert's letter, sent from Denmark in September 1915 to his dear mother, with us 100 years later.

The final fate of the P.V. 8 Eastchurch Kitten prototype isn't known. It wasn't put into production. Volunteers at the Yorkshire Air Museum have recently constructed a full size copy.

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