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DARING YOUNG MEN REMEMBERED

by Max S. Lale

When the British Empire withdrew from its Hong Kong crown colony, it was left principally with Gibraltar and Bermuda and what one publication described as "an island group that is home primarily to seals and penguins, an additional two uninhabited except for scientists and an American naval base and one occupied principally by an active volcano."¹

Not quite. Not included in this assessment of the Falkland Islands, the Caymans, the British Antarctic Territory, and the Caribbean island of Monserrat (wracked by volcanic eruptions late in the twentieth century), is a plot measuring twenty by thirty-four feet in Fort Worth's Greenwood Cemetery. Known officially as the Royal Flying Corps Cemetery, it is one of only three pieces of property in the United States owned by the British government. The other two are the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., and a small burial plot on Ocracoke Island off the coast of North Carolina.²

This Texas piece of empire is a bit of greensward which in the spring would be a credit to the lawns of Oxford. It is located in a public cemetery whose entrance is dominated by replicas of the Venetian horses at St. Mark's Cathedral. Except for the sometimes brutal heat of a Texas summer, the plot might seem transported from England itself.

In the Fort Worth cemetery are buried the remains of twelve members of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Flying Corps (Canada), eleven of them dating from World War I, when Britain trained pilots at three flying fields located in proximity to the city. The twelfth, wishing to spend eternity with his comrades, died in 1975.

The first eleven men were buried originally at one or another of the three training fields, where a total of thirty-nine were killed in accidents or died of disease or injuries during their time in Texas. When the British government acquired title in 1924, they were removed to their final resting place. Not therein, however, is the most notable of the casualties. Captain Vernon Castle, the celebrated dancer and actor who flew in combat and served as an instructor, died when he crashed while avoiding a collision with a student pilot at Benbrook on February 15, 1918.

While all are permitted the Union Jack over their graves, two of the Fort Worth dead, natives of the home island, are forever one with the part of empire Shakespeare described as "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England."

How this bit of Texas soil became a part of the sceptered isle dates to a negotiated agreement between Canada and the United States reached on June 4, 1917, allowing British students to train with United States cadets. The agreement is believed to be the first treaty for reciprocal air training sites in American history.³

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The burial site became forever a part of Britain on December 3, 1924. For \$750, Greenwood Cemetery Association deeded it to the Imperial War Graves Commission, 82 Baker Street, London W.1., England. Records describe it as "Lot Five (5) ... of Block O, Section H" in a deed signed by J.F. Prosser as secretary and William J. Bailey as president of the association.⁴

Almost as if foreshadowing the formal annexation of the burial plot as a Commonwealth property was the climate described by RAF Lieutenant Alan Sullivan in a recollection: "The situation was, in short, as though an area in Texas had been temporarily acquired by the British Empire, and in it members of an Imperial force conducted their affairs with the utmost freedom."⁵

Little evidence remains today, beyond a central cemetery shaft, a neglected memorial monument honoring Vernon Castle at Benbrook,⁶ a Texas Historical Commission marker, and thin slabs of headstone, of the air fields where the honored dead were denied their destiny over the battlefields of Europe. Training was conducted at Camp Taliferro's three Tarrant County fields named Taliferro 1, 2, and 3. No. 1, known later as Hicks Field, was located in north Fort Worth near what is now Meacham Field. No. 2 was known as Barron Field, near Everman, and No. 3, in Benbrook, was known as Carruthers Field.

Scratched from rural cotton fields, each of the three fields accommodated 2,000 officers and men, and laid the groundwork for an aviation industry in Fort Worth which continues to the present: "The Royal Flying Corps, although in Texas for only a short time, had a beneficial and lasting influence on aviation in this country."⁷

Removed from these fields onto their own tiny plot of Texas soil were:

- Cadet Cyril Albert Baker. Royal Flying Corps (prior to its re-designation as the Royal Air Force in April 1918). Died December 21, 1917, as the result of an accident. Son of Mrs. B. Baker, 23 River Street West, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada. Native of Lewisham, England.
- Cadet Claude Follett Bovill. Died of pneumonia. February 27, 1918. A British Subject born in Canada.
- Second Lieutenant M. E. Connelly. Died of illness January 14, 1918. Son of Mrs. M. L. Halket, 1901 Haro Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
- Lieutenant J. Stuart Ross Cuthbert. Died December 28, 1917, as the result of an accident. Son of Mrs. A. R. Cuthbert, Ithaca, New York.
- Sergeant Frederick George Hill. Died December 7, 1917, as the result of an accident. Husband of E. E. M. Carne (formerly Hill) of Blenheim, Ontario, Canada.
- Cadet Howard Hooten. Died March 27, 1918, as the result of an accident. Husband of L. Hooten, 30 Clairmont Apartments, Montreal, Canada.
- Cadet Milo Kirwan. Died April 8, 1918, as the result of an accident. Son of F. Kirwan, Wallace, Nova Scotia, Canada.

- Cadet Eric Douglas Manson. Killed December 24, 1917, in an accident. Only son of Mrs. B. Manson, 111 Northgate, Bury St. Edmunds, England.
- Corporal W. Miles. Died March 19, 1918, as the result of an accident. Husband of W. Miles, 84 Boundary Road, St. James Wood, London, England.
- Cadet James Gourley Ringland. Died February 21, 1918, as the result of an accident. Native of Los Angeles, California.⁸

In addition to these who died or were killed during training, a twelfth burial in the plot is that of Lieutenant Robert Herbert, Royal Air Force retired, a native of Ithaca, New York, who chose to be buried alongside his wartime comrades at his death in 1975. These names are carried on the central cemetery shaft with that of Lieutenant A. M. Breuneke, whose name also was added after his death on June 18, 1984, although he is buried elsewhere.

The central shaft carries the motto *Per Ardua ad Astra* (Through Difficulties to the Stars).

An unmarked grave in the Royal Flying Corps Cemetery is that of "Baby

Dore," the infant daughter of Canadian Captain Charles Dore, an instructor. She is buried in front of the plot's central monument.⁹

Since 1986, a "friends" group under the inspirational leadership of Dr. Griffin Murphey, a Fort Worth dentist and former naval officer, has conducted a memorial service at the cemetery on the weekend nearest American Memorial Day (in alternate years). With a wreath laying ceremony, a firing squad in World War I uniforms and helmets, a flyover in the "missing-man" formation, a pipes master in regimental uniform, and visiting senior officers from Canada and Great Britain, the memorial service pays tribute to the fallen flyers and to all patriots resting in foreign soil.

Commissioned from Army ROTC, Dr. Murphey wound up his active duty military career as a naval dental officer with the first battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment,



Fort Worth Star-Telegram Photograph Collection, Special Collections Division, The University of Texas at Arlington Libraries.

in 1975 with the evacuation of South Vietnam and support for the Mayaguez recovery operation. An expert with small arms, he startled and perhaps dismayed and intimidated his combat-type comrades with his range firing. He still uses aviation-commemorative stamps on his correspondence.

"When my dad passed away in 1986, I had occasion to drive through Greenwood Cemetery and to look for the RFC plot. I was struck with its quiet dignity and was determined that I would start a memorial service," Dr. Murphey explains. "How could anyone with my background and Anglo-philias not be enthralled with the Plot?"¹⁰

Nor was Dr. Murphey unaware of the human drama played out by host Texans and visiting Britishers in the month of their association during what was called, at the time, the Great War. He is quoted in a publication devoted to pilots and flying as saying: "The Brits and Canadians got on famously here in Fort Worth, gobbling sirloin steaks and washing it down with whiskey, competing with cowboys and oilmen for girls, crashing Jennies, and generally raising hell before going on to the Western Front."¹¹

For all the honor focused on those buried at Greenwood, none of them, in life or death, attracted the attention of the nation as did the man not buried there. Castle, a stage and film presence whose combat in the skies over France made him an international celebrity, had become a darling of Fort Worth before his death in the crash of his Jenny.¹²

With two victories in France while serving with No. 1 Squadron and as holder of the French *Croix de Guerre*, it was only natural that the captain should make the Fort Worth social scene, often with his pet monkey, Jeff, on his shoulder. A former debutante, Mrs. C.F.A. McCluer, recalled in later years that he liked to join the dance band, playing drums, at Rivercrest Country Club.¹³

Born in Norwich, England, in 1887, Castle moved to the United States in 1906 but retained his English citizenship. He learned to fly at his own expense at the Curtis school in Virginia. After joining the RFC in 1916, he was posted to No. 1 Squadron while it was based at Bailleul, France, from which he scored the first of his two victories on November 27, 1916, and was awarded the *Croix de Guerre*. In 1917 he was posted to Canada as an instructor at 83 CTS (Canadian Training Squadron), based at Mohawk, and then moved south to Texas with 83 CTS, which reformed at Benbrook. He then was transferred to 84 CTS, situated at the same station.¹⁴

Castle's first victory came, as a second lieutenant, while he was patrolling in a Nieuport at 8,000 feet over Wytschaete, in the Ypres salient. Observing two German planes flying southwest over Vlamertinghe, Castle was able to close on one of the craft, a "large 2 seater biplane," so that his observer was able to fire "almost 5 drums" from his Lewis machine gun into the German, who then was fleeing toward his own lines. G.F. Retyman, commanding No. 1 Squadron, confirmed the kill after interviewing another member of the squadron, a Lieutenant Slater, who "saw the German machine falling below the clouds in a spinning nose dive, apparently completely out of control."¹⁵

Just as his CO had testified to his combat skill, a contemporary in the United States also spoke of his flying skill somewhat later: "... this little red-headed commander was really a terrific flyer. At each field (of the three constituting Camp Taliferro) there were fifteen hangars, and he had all of his planes taken out of the fifteen hangars. He then proceeded to fly his plane through one hangar, zoomed over the next one, and went through the next. Skipping over every other hangar, he flew through half of the hangars. He really was a terrific pilot."¹⁶

The Fort Worth Press reported February 15, 1918, that "Thousands Pay Last Tribute to Capt. Castle." Funeral services were held at the Robertson Undertaking Parlor, 308-314 West Tenth Street, after which the coffin, draped with the Union Jack, was carried to the Texas and Pacific Railroad station on an artillery limber drawn by six horses. More than 200 American and Canadian flying cadets were in the line of march, along with the 133rd Field Artillery band of the 36th Division, then training at Camp Bowie, on the west side of town. An honor guard from the Royal Flying Corps followed the coffin with rifles reversed in the British tradition. The "solemn" procession moved east on Tenth Street to Houston Street and down Houston to the old T&P station, where Castle's remains were placed aboard the Sunshine Special for New York, in accordance with his wife Irene's wishes.¹⁷

For Ely Green, Castle's death was a dream shattered. The child of a black-and-white union, he had met Castle when his employer, a Waxahachie banker named O.E. Dunlap, lent the flyer his car and Green, his driver. Castle's Rolls Royce had broken down, and, while driving Castle back to Taliferro, Green told Castle he could repair the car.

Castle was so impressed with the young man's energy and competence that he made a promise to him. If Green would enlist in the U. S. Army, Castle would arrange a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps, where he promised to instruct him personally to become a military flyer, thus becoming the first black (or half-black) to do so.

One week later, after repairing the Rolls Royce and enlisting in the U.S. Army, Green "began to drive to Benbrook to deliver it to him. As he neared Carruthers, Green met a speeding ambulance. At the gate, a sentry told him that Castle had been fatally injured in a plane crash."¹⁸

Had Castle foreseen his death? Perhaps. In an essay written before his death but printed afterward, he wrote, "I see the red glow rising on the new day, and on that day, I shall see the myriads of heroes returning from hard-fought fields; and on their various uniforms will be pinned the medals that mark some heroic action. But there will also be heard the muffled drum-beat that marks the March of the Dead: those unseen heroes who rest beyond the pale of the cannon's roar, but we must not be sad; because to us comes the consolation that each died that the world might be made safe for democracy."¹⁹

Honors were paid to Castle and to his companions at Greenwood as early as the mid-1920s by then young former Great War pilots living in the Fort Worth area. Calling themselves the Flyers Club, they included men whose

names still resonate in the city's history: Ken Davis, Charles F.A. McCluer, Harry Brants, H.C. Vandervoort, and others who became civic and business leaders in the 1930-1960 period. They erected the central monument dominating the plot in the 1930s.²⁰

The last surviving widow of one of these men, Myra (Mrs. Charles) McCluer, dedicated the Texas Historical Commission marker at the site on May 25, 1992.²¹ Her husband, a lieutenant in the U.S. Army Signal Corps and a member of the Flyers Club, was an instructor at Hicks Field. She remembered well the impact on the social scene by the young British and Canadian cadets and flying officers in Fort Worth.²²

Two years after The Friends of the Royal Flying Corps revived the memorial services in 1986, Squadron Leader David Woolridge, then posted at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, was the first Royal Air Force active duty officer to become a member of the official party. In 1990, the RAF was represented by Air Commodore Bob Peters, British air attaché at the empire's Washington embassy, and Squadron Leader Dick Fallis, and in 1992 the latter also represented the RAF, along with Group Captain Trevor Beney. This also was the first time RAF aircraft overflew the graves.²³

Canadian Lieutenant General L.W.F. Cuppens, OMM CD, deputy commander-in-chief of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, led the group of distinguished visitors attending the ceremonies in 1997. After a flyover by World War II PT-17 Stearman trainers, and the singing of "The Star Spangled Banner" and "God Save the Queen" by those in attendance, General Cuppens paid tribute to the alliance of English, Canadian, and American forces in two world wars, as represented at the cemetery.

Four AT-6 trainers flown by pilots of the Confederate Air Force then overflew the site as the "Royal Air Force March" echoed over the graves. The final tribute was the playing of "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes by Pipe Major Robert G. Richardson of Glasgow, Scotland, and "The Last Post" (the English equivalent of the American "Taps") by Robert Snyder of Terrell, Texas, on the bugle. A firing squad in World War I American uniforms representing the Texas Memorial Historical Society fired volleys over the graves.

It should be noted that the Royal Flying Corps Cemetery at Greenwood, though unique as a property of the Commonwealth, is not unique as to empire burials in the United States. Twenty-four such are at the site of No. 1. British Training School (BFTS) at Terrell, Texas, and 957 burials and cremations (three of them unidentified) may be found in 445 cemeteries in the United States. From St. Helena Ascension Island to Zimbabwe, the commonwealth counted 932,176 burials and cremations of its subjects in foreign soil as of August 1, 1989.²⁴

In Forth Worth, historians and patriots remember twelve of these daring young men who lived briefly and died there, far from home in a distant war.

NOTES

*The author wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of Dr. Griffin Murphey, DDS, who opened his files, made photo copies and in general helped the author to avoid error.

¹*U.S. News and World Report*, July 7, 1997.

²*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 2, 1991.

³*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 2, 1991.

⁴Warranty Deed 1999, Book 309, record of Deeds for Tarrant County, Texas.

⁵*Aviation in Canada, 1917-1918, Being a Brief Account of the Work of the Royal Air Force Canada, the Aviation Department of the Imperial Munitions Board and the Canadian Aeroplanes Limited* (Toronto, Canada, undated).

⁶Restoration of this monument was beginning as this was written; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 6, 1977.

⁷Texas Historical Commission marker, Royal Flying Corps Cemetery.

⁸*Camaraderie, The News Letter of the Western Front Association, United States Branch* (February 1997).

⁹Printed program for the 78th "Remembrance Service" held May 29, 1995, by Friends of the Royal Flying Corps Cemetery.

¹⁰Interview with author, June 16, 1997.

¹¹*Aeroplane* (November 1992).

¹²One publication identified this aircraft as a JN-4D. Dr. Murphey believes, based on a study of photographs, that it probably was a Canadian built JN-3, nicknamed a "Canuck."

¹³Printed memorial program, 1995.

¹⁴*Aeroplane* (November 1992).

¹⁵AIR 1/1339/204/17/81, Air Ministry Records.

¹⁶Interview, Col. Ralph A. O'Neill, in *Over the Front, Quarterly of the League of WWI Aviation Historians* V. 2 (Summer 1987), p. 117.

¹⁷*The Fort Worth Press*, February 17, 1975.

¹⁸*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 21, 1997.

¹⁹*Pass in Review, the Authentic Military Newspaper at Camp Bowie and Camp Taliferro Aviation Fields, and to Give Their Friends the Truth*, Fort Worth, Texas, Vol. 1, No. 9, February 28, 1918. This publication of the 36th Division devoted its cover to a photograph of Castle, with Jeff in his arms.

²⁰Memorial service program. 1995.

²¹*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 10, 1992.

²²*Aeroplane* (November 1992).

²³Memorial service program, 1995.

²⁴*Annual Report, 1988-1989*, Commonwealth War Graves Commission, His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent, KG GCMG CCVO ADC, president.