

Captain Gilbert Mapplebeck D.S.O. (1905-08)

Captain Mapplebeck, who was attached to the 1st King's (Liverpool) Regiment, was the youngest aeroplane squadron commander in the service – he would have been 23 if he had lived to August 26th. He met his death not in the fighting line but while trying a new French monoplane.

It was on August 13th of last year that the young Liverpool airman flew to France on air service, and almost from that day he rendered most valuable services to headquarters. He was the 1st British airman to carry out a reconnaissance over the enemy's lines, and later he was the 1st airman to drop bombs from an aeroplane. All through the retreat from Mons he flew over the German hoards, and to his stubborn friends below carried the message of the foe's movements. On September 29th he was shot in a duel with German aeroplanes while 6,000 feet in the air, yet managed to reach the British lines, though he was unconscious when he landed, and his machine was bespattered with his blood. For 3 long months he lingered in hospital, Sir John French being a frequent visitor ... After leaving hospital the young airman refused to come to England. He had been awarded the D.S.O. in the New Year Honours, and he felt he had to justify his selection. Then, during the night of March 11th, he and 2 other airmen shot out into the dark for a raid on the German lines near Lillie. This was the 1st aeroplane raid attempted in the darkness of night. All suffered from a tremendous German cannonade. One of the intrepid three fell wounded among the enemy and died in Germany. Another came down in the British lines, while Captain Mapplebeck's machine was shot down just outside Lille itself. Mapplebeck set fire to his machine (A WWI Scout B.E.2a) and destroyed it and lay for 3 days in a wood, living only on the chocolate he had carried with him. Then he found shelter for a day in an empty house. As he spoke good French, he made friends with the peasants, and by their aid steered a course for Holland, for to get to our own lines in France was quite impossible. Most of the way he was in the very midst of German soldiery, only loitering at Lille to tear down a proclamation which the German commandant had posted respecting himself and a comrade. Mapplebeck was lucky enough to win through to the Dutchmen's territory and, still passing himself off as a French peasant, reached London April 4, and reported himself at Farnborough on the same day.

Soon afterwards Captain Mapplebeck returned to France with the rank of Acting Flight Commander, the youngest on record.

Extracts from the Liverpool Express.

The proclamation, which was in French, ran as follows:



Captain G.W. Mapplebeck of 4 Squadron before receiving his DSO. JMB/GSL Collection



WWI Scout B.E.2a

Two British aviators, obliged to come to ground near Lille on March 11, 1915, are still lying hid in this district. Anyone who has knowledge of their hiding-place must lay information immediately before the nearest military authority, from whom he will receive a reward proportionate to his information.

Anyone who hides the above-mentioned Englishmen or assists them to escape will be condemned to the penalty of death.

The commune will also be punished with equal severity.

Description: Height, about 5 feet 7 inches.

Dress: Cap and cloak of black leather; vest of black polished leather; no arms or any other equipment.

(Signed) The District Commandant.