

## REGINALD JAMES THOMAS FORSYTH (1893 – 1918)

Reg Forsyth was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1893 at Lile Cottage, 41 Hayberry Street Crows Nest, next door to Lewis Cottage (nbr 39), where he grew up. Reg's parents, John Lile Lewis Forsyth and Elizabeth Christina Crowley, had been given both terraces upon their marriage by John's grandfather, James Forsyth, the pioneer tanner of Willoughby.

Reg grew up a popular and talented young man, driven to do the best he could at whatever he turned his hand to. He represented the YMCA at gymnastics, being especially proficient on the horizontal and parallel bars. Reg left school aged 14 and become a wagon boy for the local wine and spirit merchant. Five years later he was in charge of one of the departments of the business. He moved on to be a travelling salesman for the large city firm of Lasseters, a job which came with a motor bike provided, which added adventure to his work.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Then in 1914 WW I commenced. Reg's younger brother Dick signed up immediately into the infantry, and was enmeshed in the killing fields of Gallipoli and the Somme. Reg had the idea if he could ride a motor bike, then he could ride a horse, and so decided he would join the Australian Light Horse Brigade. Never mind he had only ridden a horse once or twice; he borrowed a quiet horse from his neighbour and taught himself to ride and jump a horse in the playground of Crows Nest school, with the aid of long school benches as hurdles. Although the Brigade was mostly made up of country lads with years of horse riding experience, Reg made the grade and departed in August 1915 for the Middle East as a sergeant with the 7<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements for the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Light Horse.

Initially he was in training camp south of Cairo until around April 1916 when they commenced guard duties over key transport links near Suez, such as bridges, protecting them from bands of pro Turkish Arabs. During this time, Reg's diary described the extreme heat, with temperatures over 50 degrees C inside their tents, masses of flies and occasionally hornets. Food supplies in the desert were sometimes short, and he received his fair share of maladies including a septic sore on his hand. He had seen aircraft being used for reconnaissance and bombing and was even sent out into the desert to retrieve equipment from a crashed machine. Aircraft must have aroused his sense of adventure, because around this time he started to follow up enquiries for people to volunteer to join the Flying Corps.

From May 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Light Horse joined with other forces to defend the Suez Canal, to turn back Turkish advances east of the canal. The Battle of Romani was '*fought between 3 and 5 August 1916, and finally put a stop to the Turkish threat to the Suez Canal and marked the beginning of the British forces'*

*drive out of Egypt and into Palestine. The British defences were sited amidst a series of towering sand dunes, 35 kilometres east of the canal, which the Turks tried to outflank to the south early on 4 August. Initially, only the 1st Light Horse Brigade was in position to meet the Turkish attack. Heavily outnumbered it was forced to fall back, but as the day progressed both mounted and infantry reinforcements steadily arrived, allowing the position to be stabilized. The position was held throughout the night and before dawn the next morning the 1st and 2nd Light Horse Brigades advanced on foot with the bayonet. Turkish resistance collapsed at this point, and large numbers of prisoners were taken<sup>1</sup>.*

Reg saw action in July and August. His diary notes his admiration for the Turkish soldiers, as 'fine shots'. At the Battle of Romani, he fought non stop for 30 hours. On 4<sup>th</sup> August he was wounded in the chest and arm, but managed to ride to the nearest Field Ambulance. From there he was moved to the hospital at Ishmalia, on the Suez Canal. Unfortunately, his arm turned septic, which was not unusual back then as penicillin was not yet discovered. His wound was cut seven times and tubes inserted in an attempt to stem the sepsis and associated fever. By 12<sup>th</sup> August his condition had improved and he was sent to the military hospital in Cairo. However while in hospitals, he had his money, his camera and his hat stolen. In October 1916, while recuperating at a military hospital, Reg formally submitted his application in response to the call for volunteers to join the new Australian Flying Corps. He had a series of tests including a flight which he thoroughly enjoyed. He was hooked. He wrote home saying he saw 'this is where my future lies' and he saw that 'aviation in Australia after the war is going to be a big thing.'" Reg was always thinking ahead. He was now in the 68<sup>th</sup> Australian Squadron, Royal Flying Corps. His November

letter said 'It is a splendid Corps and the work is just into my boots' and then 'again one great advantage is I am learning something all the time and there are plenty of chances for bettering myself far past anything I could have achieved in the Regiment.'

The Australian Flying Corps trained and operated as part of the British Royal Flying Corps until the RAF was formed in April 1918, and the AFC disbanded along with the AIF in 1919. The RAAF was not formed until 1921.

Reg commenced as an aviation mechanic and remained in Egypt until January 1917 when he was transferred to England, travelling by boat via Alexandria, Malta, Marseilles, and Le Havre to Southampton. He was stationed near Grantham in Lincolnshire, 25 miles east of Nottingham. There was plenty of work fixing aircraft and their engines, as these early planes were very unreliable and frequently crashed. Bear in mind that the Wright brothers first powered flight had only occurred in 1903, and practical use of aircraft only became possible around 1907, so aircraft had barely been in use for 10 years. Flying was a huge, but risky adventure.

When granted leave, Reg often travelled to London and stayed with distant relatives of his grandmother, Anne Lile Lewis (Forsyth). Such trips and taking girls out cost money, which he rarely had much of, and so had to write home or borrow funds.

Like many, he applied to be a pilot and finally in June 1917 he was sent for a medical exam. About this time Reg had started having occasional bouts of illness of unknown cause, perhaps a carry over from his wounding in action. He had lost over one stone (7 kgs) since arriving in England. The doctor advised him he had a weak heart through overwork. Nonetheless he passed the medical and entered pilot training in July 1917. Pilot Officer Training School was in Oxford. He passed his exams, was promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AWM web site

Lieutenant, and in early August was sent to Wyton near Huntingdon, about 12 miles north west of Cambridge. His first flying lessons soon followed and by mid August, Reg was flying solo.

First he flew Farman aircraft from France, then later English Avro and Royal Aircraft Factory FE2B airplanes.



Farman <sup>2</sup>

His log book and diary record each day of his flying training. The overriding factor in whether he flew or not revolved around the English weather. In winter especially, the wind and rain prevented any activity. Usually they flew early morning when the weather was less intense. His diary also records the many crashes, often fatal, which occurred in the training corps. More pilots were killed in aircraft training accidents in WW I than were shot down by enemy fire.

He met up with brother Dick while on leave in London and tried to convince him to join the flying corps, but Dick would not leave the infantry. In early September Reg was posted to Retford about 17 miles west of Lincoln. Here he experienced a couple of forced landings due to engine failures or bad weather, with fortunately no lasting damage to either pilot or aircraft. He started to do longer flights sometimes flying off for a day or two away from Base.

He started night flying, but all was not well. His mystery illness had returned and quite a number of his fellow training pilots had crashes, a number of which were fatal. At one

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<sup>2</sup> 1000 aircraft photos

point seven were killed in three days. In addition the renowned English winter was closing in, limiting flying opportunities and casting a pall over the countryside. In November he experienced another engine failure, but again walked away from the machine, having been able to guide it in the dark to the airfield. In late November he was posted to the airfield at Ternhill near Market Drayton, north of Shrewsbury.

Some of the aircraft used castor oil and the fumes made him ill. He started taking a tonic but still remained off colour. Just before Christmas he travelled to London on compassionate leave, as the father of the family he stayed with there had died. The girl he knew there was also not well. In many ways, it was a miserable Christmas for him. By the time he returned to base, more of his fellow pilots had been killed in training accidents, and he asked one of the local people he knew to be his second next of kin.

By early January 1918, Reg had accumulated 69 hours total flying time, 61 of which were solo. In January 1918, he commenced advanced flying training, and started flying Sopwith Pup aircraft, which were used for training in combat techniques.

Sopwith Pup



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His log book notes that on one aircraft, B6089, the engine used to cut out on turns and climbs. He was flying B6089 on 20th January 1918, for some formation flying, but he got ahead of the other machines, and in

<sup>3</sup> 1000 aircraft photos

accordance with procedures, made a vertical bank to fall back into formation. His aircraft then went into a vertical spin and crashed. Reg received serious head injuries and a broken ankle. He was admitted to the local hospital, but died of his injuries on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1918.

Second Lieutenant Reginald James Thomas Forsyth's grave is in a church graveyard at Tilstock, not far from Ternhill airfield. Always striving to improve himself, like many of those airmen at the time, he perished doing what he loved, in the great adventure of flying. In one of war's ironies, his brother Dick having survived the killing fields of Gallipoli, then went to the mud and guts of the Somme trenches. Not tempted to join his brother in aviation, Dick survived the Great War, returned to his family in Sydney, married and lived into his 80s.



FE2B



DH1



Headstone at Tilstock



Tilstock