

## Flight Sub-Lt R.A.J. ('Rex') Warneford V.C. (1891-1915)

The Royal Air Force website includes links to all its active squadrons where you can find brief histories of each. In these it is uncommon to see individuals named, mostly it includes dates of their formation, disbandment, role changes, host bases and aircraft types, but the entry against 201 Squadron recognises the award of the Victoria Cross to Rex Warneford in 1915. And rightly so! However, it isn't my intent here to retell the story of Warneford's exploits, marvellous, ground-breaking and heroic though they undoubtedly were, because these are well known and have already been better told by others more qualified than me. Furthermore, Warneford's special part in the history of 201 Squadron, was there for us all to read every day we went to work, and I'm sure it still is today.



When I left the RAF in 2008, I settled in Stratford-upon-Avon and was fortunate to secure the role of Bursar at the local boys' grammar school, King Edward VI School, or 'K.E.S.' to its community. I remain there today. The School has a notable history, it being where William Shakespeare was educated in the 1570s, and the schoolroom where he learned his 'rhetoric, Latin and a little Greek' is still used today. In getting to know the School, I noted that when it moved to a 4-house system in the early 2000s, the new Houses were named after notable Old Edwardians one of which was 'Warneford House'; surely not, I thought?!

Rex was born in Darjeeling, India on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1891, the son of a chief engineer with the Cooch Behar railway. His parents' marriage was not a happy one and Rex spent most of his time with his father receiving an unconventional education, riding engine footplates – throwing logs into the firebox and pulling the whistle cord, going on a tiger hunt, riding ponies, studying the stars, whilst also learning native dialects and the law of the jungle. It was a wonderful life for a boy.



When his parents separated, his mother remarried, Rex never saw his father again and was sent to England in 1900 to live with his paternal grandfather, Tom Warneford, a vicar in County Durham.

Tom was a kind man and was fascinated to hear Rex's tales of India, but he knew Rex needed a proper education to prepare him for adulthood. Tom Warneford was a great friend of the then Headmaster of King Edward VI School, so in January 1901, Rex arrived at K.E.S. as a boarder and choral scholar. The Headmaster's philosophy was that it was not the sole object to cram a boy with as much learning as possible, rather he liked to see a boy work, whatever he was doing, not with his head alone, but with his heart as well.

Rex was very happy at school, feeling secure and excelling at anything he could do with his hands: carpentry, physics, engineering and he had an aptitude for mathematics. The Masters liked him but found him individualistic, his peers liked him because he was a character. Not enamoured with playing rugby on cold, wet fields, he preferred to rent a punt on the Avon or go to the station to study the engines, or to walk in the rolling hills and fields. Sadly, his time of contentment at K.E.S. was cut short after 4 years by the death of his grandfather.

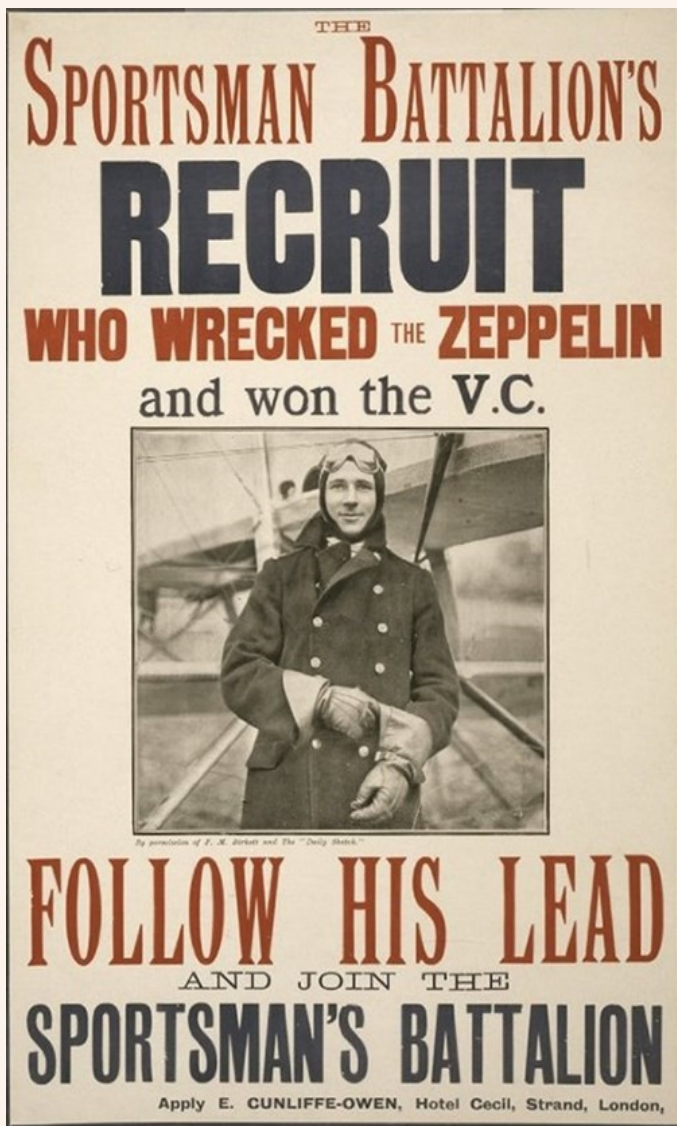
For the next 9 years, Rex became an apprentice, later a Fourth Officer, for the British India Steam Navigation Company, operating between Calcutta and Rangoon, Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong. His intellect enabled him to develop quickly and the ship's officers placed considerable trust in him. He also enjoyed the danger and excitement of meeting the assortment of maritime folk all across the Far east – the pirates, the fisherman, the police and the traffickers. It taught him independence and his quick brain got him out of many tight spots, including when he set light to his blanket trying to hide a forbidden cigarette, whilst in Calcutta Hospital with appendicitis. These experiences strengthened his character and made him able to take things in his stride.

When war was declared in 1914, Rex returned to London and enlisted in the Sportsman's Battalion. Quickly, believing he would see no action in what he referred to as 'a sort of boy scouts jamboree for old gentlemen', he was accepted into the Royal Naval Air Service in February 1915. Rex passed the stiff test and was assessed to have above-average intelligence, an iron nerve and initiative. He joined Number 1 Squadron RNAS, flying the Morane-Saulnier monoplane, with instructions to carry out patrols, bomb submarines and their bases and attack German troop concentrations in Belgium. His commanding officer prophetically said of Rex 'he will either do big things or kill himself'. Tragically, as we know, he would do both within a few weeks, though his demise was in an accident rather than self-inflicted.

For his downing of Zeppelin LZ37 over Ghent, Warneford was rightly awarded the Victoria Cross. It was also entirely characteristic of the man that, forced by the explosion he caused to land his disabled plane 30 miles behind enemy lines, he repaired the damaged aircraft using a handkerchief and cigarette holder before heading back to base at St. Pol. His V.C. award was notified by telegram from King George V. In parallel, the French President,



made him a Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur, with the automatic companion of the Croix de Guerre. During his acceptance speech in Paris he spoke of his life in India, his grandfather and his schooldays in Stratford. His Headmaster, recalling his independence of spirit, wrote 'such a supreme test of coolness and unselfish daring cause me no surprise whatsoever'.



The aftermath of the downing of the Zeppelin, which many had thought to be invincible, included the Government seizing the moment to boost morale following a series of military setbacks and to increase recruitment. Unfortunately, the respite for Rex was brief and two weeks later, when testing a new Farman F27 biplane, the propeller broke off and cut away the aircraft's tail sending it into a fatal spin. Rex was 23 when he died, his mother would accept his V.C. some months later. News of his death was extensively covered by the media which whipped up public emotion. His funeral at Brompton Cemetery was attended by 50,000 people and was filmed. Senior officers from the Admiralty, Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service were in attendance. Rex is buried close to his beloved grandfather Tom, and the memorial stone at his grave was commissioned by the Daily Express. In the years after his death, interest in Rex did not diminish with collectible cigarette cards, portraits, postcards, watercolours and oil paintings all depicting his engagement with the Zeppelin.

Fast forward 84 years and a vacancy for the post of 'Head of Warneford House' appeared in mid-2009 at K.E.S. Sensing 'my name was on it', I threw my hat in the ring and duly got the job. I was to serve 6 years as Head of Warneford House before taking a broader role as House Coordinator. One of my final tasks before handing over the reins was to help organise the Centenary Celebrations of Warneford's V.C. Award in June 2015. To commemorate the V.C. recipients of the First World War, a commemorative stone would be placed in their home town but as Warneford was born in India, the initial list of stones and their placement did not include Warneford's. However, the School successfully petitioned the Department for Communities and Local Government to secure a stone for Stratford, located at the School. A second successful appeal was made in Exmouth, which is where Rex's mother lived after she separated from his father.

Our afternoon of celebration featured a talk about Warneford's life, followed by a ceremony in the street immediately outside the School, attended by the School and invited guests including a number of Association members: Andrew Roberts, Garfield Porter, Andy Stewart, Chaz Counter, Rich Marshall, Richie Williams and Robin Woolven.



At the conclusion of the ceremony the commemorative stone was unveiled by Mrs Faye Erskine (Rex's niece and eldest surviving relative), a wreath was laid by the Head Boy and refreshments were served.

A final twist in this welcome affiliation with the Squadron is that I was contacted by Graham 'Sheds' House who'd heard about the commemoration and who had 'acquired' a portrait of Warneford which he thought we'd be interested in. So with the blessing of the Association, the Squadron itself was still dormant at the time, we have the portrait proudly on display alongside copies of his medals. We realise we'll have to return it one day, but there's no hurry.



Rex would be proud as punch to know that Warneford House is in rude health as the reigning House Champions and in pole position to retain their crown in 2024.

It's a small world!

**Mike Hawley (Flt Cdr 1997-1999)**