THE FIRST FLYING VC

“...I am off on a trip from which I don’t expect to return but which I hope will shorten the war a bit. I shall probably be blown up by my own bomb or, if not, killed by rifle fire.” So went the prophetic final letter to his wife from an aviator who was to become the first airman to be awarded his country’s highest medal for valour, the Victoria Cross

William Rhodes-Moorhouse, known to his family and friends simply as Will, was born in London on 26 September 1887, the second of four children to Edward Moorhouse and Mary Anne. His grandfather William Barnard Rhodes, who was one of the founders of the colony of New Zealand, and his wife were childless. A liberal minded Maori chief sent along one of his daughters to co-operate in bearing them a child. Mary Anne was born and adopted by her father and step-mother. When Mary Anne grew up she married her step-mothers brother, Edward Moorhouse.

Will’s parents settled in England in 1884 and he was brought up largely in Northamptonshire. As a small boy Will became interested in machines of all kinds, in particular steam engines and locomotive sets which were purchased locally in Northampton. He was a natural when it came to mechanics but he never excelled himself at his schooling. He was educated at Harrow and then at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he found he never entirely fitted in. His background was wealthy enough to allow him to devote himself to the interests that fascinated him, fast cars and
motorcycles; he became quite an expert at sliding and skid braking, he could skid right into his garage, judging it within inches. Will said that his time spent at Cambridge was completely wasted and he wished that he had gone straight from Harrow into the engineering shops.

He owned several racing cars including a 58hp Fiat, which he named after his fiancée, Linda Morritt. Will was often seen at motor rallies, trials and events at circuits such as Brooklands. He was not especially outstanding at motor racing, so to satisfy his ever increasing appetite for speed and exhilaration he turned to the fledgling activity of flying.

Moorhouse gained aviator’s certificate No.147 on 17 October 1911 over Huntingdon in a Blériot monoplane similar in design to the aircraft that Louis Blériot flew across the English Channel for the first time only two years earlier. He spent much of his time entertaining friends with flying demonstrations over Portholme Aerodrome in Huntingdon. This aerodrome was established by James Radley in 1910 who the following year collaborated with Will to design the Radley- Moorhouse monoplane, based on the Blériot aircraft. It was in this monoplane that Will gained considerable experience and became one of the top cross-country pilots of his time.

1911 was an exciting time for the young Moorhouse. He travelled to the United States, where flying a Gnome engined Blériot monoplane, he competed in a variety of meetings and air races. The name of William Moorhouse was added to the American Hall of
Fame by winning the much-coveted Harbor Prize, worth the equivalent of around £1000 sterling. He also collected a substantial total in prize monies during a successful tour, which he rounded off by becoming the first man to fly beneath the span of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge.

After selling the Blériot to Earle Remington in Los Angeles, Will returned home. In 1912 flying the Radley-Moorhouse he entered, and came second, in the first Aerial Derby at Hendon. He also made the first cargo flight, carrying Barrats boots from Northampton to Hendon before marking his recent marriage to Linda by flying her and a journalist, J H Lebbdoer from the London Evening News, across the English Channel in a French Breguet U2 with a 70HP Canton-Unnee engine. This was the first aerial crossing of the Channel with a pair of passengers. The aeroplane was one of a pair due to be entered for the British Military Aircraft trials at Larkhill in July, but as the weather was unfavourable the flight was delayed until 4 August. The crossing from Douai was completed safely but as the weather again deteriorated an early landing became necessary. After a journey of 130 mile they came into land at Bethersden in Kent, the biplane was caught by the wind and blown against a tree receiving damage severe enough to have to pull out of the trials at Larkhill. Fortunately no one was injured during the landing except, maybe, Linda Moorhouse’s confidence in aviation. She begged her husband to give up flying, and he reluctantly agreed...for the time being.

The year 1913 was to prove no less adventurous than the previous two years. Will
once again concentrated on motor racing and rallying, he was a regular at Brooklands with his mechanic Tookey, and took part, with Radley, at the Monte Carlo rally driving a Rolls Royce. Will sustained a fairly serious head injury in a car accident whilst travelling as a passenger which was to affect his later return to flying.

Will was also to receive a considerable fortune bequeathed by his maternal grandfather providing that the name of Rhodes was added to Moorhouse. This year also welcomed the birth of Will and Linda’s first and only child, William Henry Rhodes-Moorhouse who was later to become an Olympic skier in the 1937-38 Games and a pilot with No.601 Squadron, RAF, qualifying at the age of seventeen. At the age of twenty-eight he was shot down and killed while flying a Hawker Hurricane during the Battle of Britain.

Finally 1913 came to an end with Will’s mother buying Parnham House, a sixteenth century manor at Beaminster, Dorset. Will and Linda planned to have a cottage built on the estate, but the outbreak of War the following summer halted these plans.

Rhodes-Moorhouse joined the Royal Flying Corps as a Second Lieutenant on 24 August 1914, just twenty days into the War. He flew for the first time, since making his promise to his wife, on 6 November for duration of twenty-five minutes over Brooklands where he landed at 0700 hours. The Army considered Will physically unfit for flying, the reason given was that he had a full set of dentures as a result of his earlier accident. He was therefore given command of the Aircraft Park at South Farnborough which
accepted and tested Renault engines for the BE series of aircraft. After constant appeals to his superiors, along with the urgent need for replacement experienced pilots on the Western Front, Will was posted to No. 2 Squadron at Merville on 20 March 1915.

Major T I Webb-Bowen commanded No. 2 Squadron and Will’s flight commander was Maurice Blake. He started operational flying immediately usually flying BE2a No.492 on reconnaissance patrols, artillery spotting and photography. Incidentally, it was No.2 Squadron that was the first to use cameras to record enemy trenches during the battle of Neuve Chapelle. Ivor Lloyd was regularly Will’s observer and described how when they chased enemy aircraft they would get so close that they could fire their revolvers at the pilots. Lloyd described Will as “...the life and soul of everything connected with [the squadron’s] work and other escapades indulged in by the less serious members of the community”.

The Second Battle of Ypres had begun and German reinforcements were being routed through the railway junction at Courtrai, 35 miles beyond the front line. Lieutenant Colonel Trenchard assigned this as one of three targets to be bombed by No. 2 squadron. Rhodes-Moorhouse was ordered to fly to Courtrai.

Will’s usual BE2b No. 492 was under repair after receiving some damage during a photographic reconnaissance with Lieutenant W.S. Douglas on 16 April, so he selected BE2b No. 687 which was described as a “good climber”, for the mission. The observer
usually allocated to No. 687, was a young Royal Field Artillery Lieutenant Shalto Douglas, (who was to become AOC in Chief-Middle East during World War Two) but on this occasion the aircraft was to be flown solo.

Take-off was at 1505 hours 26 April 1915 carrying a 100lb bomb. It was about thirty-five minutes flying time to the Courtrai railhead from Merville, and Will took time to assure himself of the positive identification of the target before, contrary to Maurice Blake’s advice to bomb from altitude, descending to 300ft in order to drop his bomb accurately. As the aircraft approached in a shallow dive it was greeted by a hail of rifle and small-arm fire, augmented by a machine-gun at virtually point-blank range from the belfry of Courtrai church. A shell ripped open his left thigh, and a bullet took off three fingers from his right hand. To release the bomb he had to let go of the stick and lean right over to activate the mechanism with his left hand. The explosion nearly sent the aeroplane out of control. Will’s leg was now useless and so was his right hand. Added to this the aircraft’s seat was so shattered that it sagged forward into the controls. Fighting the agony, shock and nausea Will set course for the half-hour flight back to Merville. Flying low to keep up speed to re-cross the lines as quickly as possible he was again hit by a bullet, while crossing the Ypres battlefield. The bullet ripped through his stomach and came to rest over the ribs on his left side.

Indian troops on their way to the front looked up in astonishment, they asked for details of the sortie, which were issued three days later written in Hindustani.
Sitting on the bank of the Lys Canal listening to the gramophone, with several others, Flight Commander Maurice Blake described later how he “...saw an aeroplane flying very low on the other side of the river, when it turned to land the machine was only 30ft high. It was Moorhouse and he switched on the engine and cleared the hedge on the other bank and made a perfect landing on the top ground. Webb-Bowen and I went to the machine and we found poor old Moorhouse was badly hit. [I] sent for a stretcher and cut anti-drift wires. He said he felt as if his stomach was shot out of him”. They lifted the pilot from the cockpit and laid him on the ground. The bottom of the fuselage was awash with blood. Before being taken to No. 6 Casualty Clearing Station Will insisted on making a full and proper report on his sortie. In the meantime his personal fitter counted ninety-five holes in the aircraft.

Watched by Blake, Medical Officer Gale examined the wounded man, “The bullet has ripped the inside of his stomach to pieces”. It soon became apparent that his wounds were too grave for surgeons to save him, and by noon the next day it was clear he was nearing the end of his life. William knew his condition was hopeless before being told by Padre Chavasse. He had previously expressed a wish that his body be allowed back to England and buried on the hill overlooking Parnham house where he and Linda had planned to build their cottage. At 2.30 that afternoon he finally passed away having received Holy Communion, Blake was at his bedside, and had been since earlier in the morning. In his good hand Will held a photograph of his baby son. “It’s strange dying,
Blake old boy - unlike anything one has ever done before, like one’s first solo”.

It was extremely unusual for the dead to be brought home, but on learning the wishes of William, General Officer Commanding the Royal Flying Corps, Hugh Trenchard, and by special permission of Sir John French, ordered the honour, along with posthumous promotion to First Lieutenant, back dated to 24 April. Will’s body was brought home to England and given a military funeral with full honours before being laid to rest on the crest of the hillock at Parnham to the crack of the firing party and the haunting sound of the Last Post.

The *London Gazette* announced on Saturday 22 May 1915 that His Majesty King George V had been graciously pleased to approve the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to the flyer. The following Monday *The Times* added that, “The VC conferred on Second Lieutenant Rhodes-Moorhouse is the first to be won by an airman.”

In considering the award the authorities had no prior knowledge of Will’s final letter to his wife foretelling, so accurately, what he was about to face, and very little idea of the professionalism and great experience he drew upon. The Nation lost a pilot and engineer who could have, in the coming years, contributed much more to aviation than this suicidal mission.
Postscript: In 1991 William Barnard Rhodes-Moorhouse surviving relatives decided that the Victoria Cross Medal Group was too valuable to be publicly displayed, and that it should be sold. The proceeds being converted to a Charitable Trust to support activities in aviation. When the VC and campaign medals were sold they fetched the highest price ever for a single medal group. The WB Rhodes Moorhouse VC Trust currently provides flying and engineering scholarships through The Air League and contributes to the RAF Benevolent Fund and the Blond McIndoe Centre at Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead.