

VC for attack on airship

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TODAY, 98 years after Rex Warneford's death, his incredible heroics taking out the pride of the German war machine, a terrifying zeppelin, bears more resemblance something in a Hollywood movie than real life.

In 1915, World War One had been raging for a year. Britain had suffered a series of demoralising defeats and then, in May, massive 521 foot-long airships began bombing London in what was to be first 'forgotten' blitz.

The east of the country lived in fear and London was unprepared and unable to stop these silent assassins.

Radar and anti-aircraft guns were yet to be invented and the fledgling British air force could rarely reach the high-altitude airships - there appeared no way to stop the enemy.

Sub-Lieutenant Warneford was born on October 15, 1891, in Darjeeling in the foothills of the Himalayas, where his parents were in the colonial service.

By the start of the war his mother moved back to Exmouth and they were living at 2 Morton Road when her son joined the Royal Naval Air Service - the forerunner of Navy's Fleet Air Arm.

After Warneford had completed a dozen solo flights on June 7, 1915, he was ordered to join a four-plane midnight attack on the zeppelin sheds at Bercham in occupied Belgium.

Warneford had never flown in the dark before, and quickly lost his fellow pilots - and it was then, when flying a tiny single-seater Morane Parasol, mostly made from just wood and canvas, he chanced upon airship LZ-37 airship cruising at 7,000ft, which was kept airborne by 953,000 cubic feet of highly flammable hydrogen.

He was armed with a side arm, an ineffective carbine, and just six 20-pound bombs to be used on the zeppelin sheds.

He spotted the airship at Ostend and his pursuit involved a 50-minute flight before he finally overtook it over Bruges.

When he caught up with it, Warneford fired off a few rounds from his service revolver before the German gunners strafed his wings.

He tried another few attacks, but the carbine gun had no effect and the juggernaut airship gave chase

before soaring to 11,000ft, making it impossible for Rex to climb above it.

It was then the zeppelin's captain made the fatal mistake, by dropping back to 7,000ft to find a gap in the clouds.

Rex retreated to the rear of the zeppelin, gaining altitude in order to attack from above and cut his engines, diving to



Painting by Ralph Gillies-Cole depicting the aftermath of Flight Sub-Lieutenant Rex Warneford's attack on German airship LZ 37

within 200ft of the zeppelin.

He released his bombs - at first there was no visible effect, but it was while releasing his final bomb that a gigantic explosion ripped through the airship.

Warneford's plane was enveloped in flames as chunks of burning metal exploded all around.

The ship crashed to the ground, killing all but one of its crew. Warneford's plane spluttered out of control and he crash-landed 35 miles behind German lines.

Warneford discovered that only his fuel line was broken. He fixed this with a cigarette holder and took off for home.

By the time he returned to base at 10.30am the next day, his exploits were being celebrated across the Empire. George V awarded him the Victoria Cross that day, while France followed up with its Legion of Honour. He was the first pilot to shoot down a zeppelin.

But Warneford was to enjoy his fame for only 10 more days. He travelled to Paris to receive the French accolade and was to return to base in a new biplane yet to be fitted with safety belts.

Immediately after take off, the plane inexplicably bucked and he was thrown out in mid-air and killed.

Warneford was buried at London's Brompton Cemetery. His VC is on display at the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton.



Flight Sub-Lieutenant Rex Warneford.