War in The Air

William Spriggs (1898-1986)

My thanks to the Spriggs family — Hilary Hellum, John Spriggs, David Spriggs and Tim Hellum for their generous contributions to and edits of this article. A special thank you to you William Spriggs for your gallantry to advance a noble cause at any cost. We shall not forget -- not William, not millions of people on both sides who died in this, yet another senseless war.

William (Will) Spriggs (1898-1986) is my uncle. He was the eldest of two girls and two boys born in Birmingham, England to Quakers William Spriggs and Alice Hayward. Like many of our extended Quaker family, they were well-to-do. His father, William Sr. co-owned a mattress and furniture manufacturing company and ultimately, both he and his future wife Alice inherited considerable wealth from their parents and relatives.

Early Life

Will, my mother Hester and siblings Bob and Alison had a privileged childhood. They lived in a large house in the pleasant village of Acock's Green on the outskirts of industrial Birmingham. They had servants — a cook, a nanny and a maid. A motorcar was kept in the carriage house. The children attended schools for the privileged and in the back yard was a miniature ride-on steam train designed and built, probably, by Will's father and his factory workers. During the summers, the family retired to Torquay on the South England coast, where days passed with fun outings to the

beach, Quaker meetings and socials with Quaker friends and family. As well, there were trips to the Lake District in Northwest England with visits to their cousins, the Richardsons. It was a good life. Will's grandfather, also William (1821-1899), was a successful clothier in Birmingham and Worcester. He manufactured and retailed wool clothing. He must have been a consummate businessman, for the family lived at Battenhall Mount, a sprawling Victorian mansion with extensive grounds, enormous rooms extravagantly furnished and maids to do everything.

Denied

When William (Will's father) was a young man he had what he thought was a 'watershed idea.' He approached his parents. It might have gone like this: Will found his mother, as was her custom at 10am on a Saturday morning, sewing in the parlour. "Mother, how is father's mood this morning? Does he strike you as approachable on an important matter?" "Well, yes, I suppose so dear. You have nothing to lose by trying. He's in the library." More like everything to lose, thought William. His father was a man who held very clear ideas about how life ought to unfold, for himself and for those in his realm. William knocked on the library door, the required protocol, then waited for the familiar "Enter." "Father, may I speak with you for a moment?" "Yes, of course, William. What's on your mind?" "I've been thinking a lot about a choice of career lately and keep coming back to the idea of engineering. You know how I love to plan and build things. I think it's a good fit for me and I'm asking for your permission to pursue that."

There. It was out. William's life hung in the balance. His father was silent, his brows knitted.

William's heart sank. He'd seen that look on many occasions. None of them turned out well. An eternity passed before his father spoke.

"William. I have done well in my business, as you know. We lead privileged lives here. We are respected members of both our Quaker community and of the community at large. Would you not agree?"
"Yes father."
"We have earned a social standing, William. With that standing come opportunities. Doors open, not for me so much anymore, but for you and your siblings. What schools you and your future children attend, what you will make of yourself, whom you will marry, where and how you will live, depend in great measure on your social standing. Do you understand that?"
"Yes father."
"Well, I must say you leave me to wonder on that point. You see, William, engineering is not becoming of a gentleman with our social standing and a gentleman you must be. You are my eldest son, William. As the eldest son, like it or not, you have responsibilities. I expect you to join the family business. I expect you to live as a gentleman."
"But fa…"
"That's all William."

Business

William did as directed, almost. He had no inclination to be under his father's thumb in the clothing business, so convinced his father to

Note: Details of this event were drawn from deductive reasoning, historical records and first person and official accounts and may contain

Reconnaissance photos were pieced together to create a mosaic of the enemy's position

A reconnaissance camera which was secured to the fuselage adjacent the pilot's open cockpit. Source: International War Museum

A message streamer dropped from the cockpit

Will with RAF wings, back home at Edgemere, the family farm, 1919 after discharge

Headquarters, Fourth Army.

To Second Lieutenant W. Spriggs.
Royal Air Force

15th Feb. 1919.

I congratulate you on the gallantry and devotion to duty for which you have been awarded

The Distinguished Flying Cross.

Rawlinson. Genl:

Commanding Fourth Army.

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Top: Cert. of Congratulations, Gen Rawlinson

Bot: Distinguished Flying Cross

This page: Will's Marconi station at the farm, 1919

Overleaf: Top R and L Family portraits, 1919

Overleaf Bottom: Brother Bob (L) andWill (R) 1919

Overleaf R: Will in RCAF uniform with flyer's cap, 1919

secure him his own business which had engineering elements to it — the Birmingham Woven Wire Mattress Company. Woven wire mattresses in the late 1800s had been around a long time and for no particularly good reason. They were the wire mesh equivalent of a hammock. By 1915, spring coil mattresses had been transforming the mattress industry for 40 years. Mattress technology was evolving rapidly and to make matters worse, a recession had set in. Birmingham Woven Wire Mattress Company had become an anachronism, the horse and buggy of mattress makers. Unless the company made some dramatic changes, it was doomed to fail.

Come the war, both of William's parents had died, leaving he (46) and Alice (47) free to make their own decisions, It was time for a change. For the 20 years William had been with Birmingham Woven Wire Mattress Company, he could not recall one day he had truly enjoyed. Business was not his cup of tea. He was a quiet, retiring man, not comfortable networking, deal-making and managing people and paperwork. And there was another matter. Son Bob had lost an eye in a school accident. He and Alice were concerned that Bob, with his disability, would have trouble finding a career niche in England. Perhaps farming was the answer, in a new land. William consulted with Alice, as is the Quaker way, then sold his share of the business.

To Canada

It was decided. The family would immigrate to Canada. Canada It was not an impromptu affair. Spriggs' decisions are carefully made, well-considered. Land was cheap in Canada. They

would buy a farm, work hard and live a peaceful life in the country with fresh air, home-grown food and independence — free of expectations and stress. First, an exploratory trip was made to confirm the plan was viable and locate a farm. An apple farm was found and purchased near Wolfville, Nova Scotia. They called it Edgemere, for it rested on the shore of the Bay of Fundy. It was removed from the nearest town. The farm had been unoccupied for some time. It was badly rundown, the house, outbuildings and equipment in disrepair. But the price was right and excellent schools were found for the offspring. The new chapter began.

Edgemere

The Spriggs departed Liverpool on the Corsican and on the 17th of April, 1915 they arrived in St John's, Newfoundland, Canada. Once on the farm and with the diligence of Quakers on a mission, William, Alice and two paid locals, a man and a woman, set to work. William and his help brought the farm back to life while Alice, with her help, renovated the house and planted a huge flower and vegetable garden. Gone was their life of privilege. Gone was their treasured extended family. Gone was their Quaker community. Before them was a foreign land, a foreign people and a foreign occupation. They had much to learn.

The lessons came quickly. As William made purchases for the farm, he had a rude awakening. Not all Canadians did business in the manner of Quakers. Dishonest people took advantage of the newcomers trust and sold William a lame horse and faulty farm equipment. By the next spring, Edgemere had come to life again. A reasonable

apple crop was had. Selling them, though, was another matter. It was 1916; the war was in full swing and the apple market had collapsed. Yet the Spriggs laboured on at Edgemere for the duration of the war.

In 1919, after years of back-breaking work with little to show for it, the Spriggs gave up, sold the farm, undoubtedly for a loss, and at ages 51 and 52, retired to the quiet, pretty village of Baie d'Urfé near Montreal. The farming chapter had not left them destitute, for they bought a big house on the edge of the St Lawrence River and the youngsters continued to board at the same schools.

Joining Up

By 1915, both Bob and Will had chosen their career paths. Ironically, it was engineering. Will had enrolled in pre-engineering at Acadia University. By the spring of 1916, the war had entered its third year. Will (17) had not yet been in Canada a year when recruiters for the newly formed 219th Battalion Nova Scotia Highlander Regiment appeared at his school. His classmates were joining. Will could not refuse, nor did he wish to. His father was at his side at the recruiting office. "You realize he's underage," he said firmly to the recruiting officer. The latter nodded. Honesty was central to Quaker faith. And in this case, clarity was important. Should Will, as an underage recruit, survive the war (and there was a reasonable chance he would not), he was entitled to a free university education. That he later got.

Training

On the 22nd of February, 1916 Will signed up. He entered officer's Flight School and trained through that summer where, fatefully, he learned signalling and Morse code. In September, he sailed for England where he underwent lengthy additional training, first with the Imperial Army, then on April 1, 1918, with the newly formed Royal Air Force (RAF). Flight training continued. He took courses in photography, gunnery, ground signals, cross country navigation, formation flying and bombing and strafing. Finally, as a certified pilot, on the 10th of August, 1918, Will was transferred to France where he was assigned to Squadron 8 of the Fourth Army under General Henry Rawlinson. After two years of training, 2nd Lieutenant William Spriggs, untested in war, found himself on the front line of the most ferocious and deadly war the world had ever witnessed.

Reconnaissance

By 1917, the role of reconnaissance crews was to take photographs of enemy positions which would give allied command strategic intelligence about exactly where the enemy was, their strength and their hardware and importantly, tactical intelligence in the form of feedback to artillery and tanks on the accuracy of their fire. Observer aircraft were fitted with specialized cameras attached to the side of the fuselage which were operated by the pilots. The cameras were capable of taking multiple images shot on a grid, which, back at command, were pieced together to form a mosaic of the enemy position and nature.

The Armstrong Whitworth F.K.8 Aw160 flown by William Spriggs

Google search term: AW observer plane 1918

Observer aircraft were two-seater open cockpit biplanes designed to be slow and steady to accommodate the photography. Those characteristics made them them highly vulnerable to enemy fire. Reconnaissance was a risky business. By definition, it meant that one was always operating on and behind the enemy's front line. Attrition rates were high. New pilots used to call themselves the 20 Minute Club because their life expectancy in combat in 1916-1917 was 20 minutes.

Acquiring intelligence was one thing; getting it into the hands of command was another. There were no airstrips on the front line. In the early years of the war, the solution was simple. Air crews called it 'message in a bottle.' Weighted bags or multi-coloured message streamers were dropped near the command post. As radio technology improved, radios were installed in reconnaissance aircraft allowing intelligence to be conveyed instantaneously to ground forces by oneway Morse code.

The Aircraft

At the outbreak of war in 1914, only 11 years had passed since the Wright Brothers first lifted off the ground. Aircraft were little more than a contraption of wood, wire and canvas. They were not capable of mounted weaponry; pilots encountering the enemy would resort to throwing stones and insults in passing. However, in the four years to 1918, aircraft had developed considerably — by the Germans, renowned for their mastery of things mechanical, and by the Allies. Both fighters and

reconnaissance aircraft were bi or triplanes with two open cockpits.

For almost the entirety of the his war service, Will flew an FK8 Armstrong Whitworth 160, an observer plane and light bomber. The AW160 had two cockpits for pilot and observer. It was purpose built for acquiring photographic intelligence. Thus, it was capable of high stability at very slow speeds. Strafing was carried out with a Vickers rigid mounted machine gun. The Vickers was a recent innovation. Its firing action was synchronized to the engine, allowing it to fire between the rotating propellor blades. Fire was directed by manoeuvring the aircraft. Bombs were loaded under the wings of the FK8 AW160. The observer operated Lewis machine guns mounted on each side of his cockpit.

Parachutes were only sporadically used in the RAF before 1920. The pragmatic argument against them was that the chute's bulk restricted the crew's movements and accordingly, their abilities in the already cramped cockpit. The other, a most tragic argument, was that Allied Command viewed chutes as the coward's way out, that it was the crew's duty to find the moral fibre to press home the attack to the very end. Thus, for the duration of the war, the fate of the aircraft was necessarily the fate of its crew.

Duties

The observer's job was to shoot down or scare off enemy aircraft using his two mounted machine guns. The pilot's job was to fly the plane, carry out the photography, convey the intelligence to the

ground forces and, if necessary, strafe and bomb enemy positions. Taking photos of enemy trenches was risky business. It required the aircraft to fly in a straight, uninterrupted line while a string of photos were taken, photos which would later be pieced together to provide a mosaic of the enemy's position.

This straight line fly path requirement was well-known to the Germans who could then accurately aim their anti-aircraft fire at the 'sitting duck.' If the pilot broke away to avoid the 'ack ack' he was obliged to go back and start over. Pilot and observer could also be assigned offensive missions, sweeping low over enemy positions while strafing and bombing. On the bottom of the pilot's cockpit was a heavy glass floor embossed with cross hairs for sighting. More often than not, however, bad weather and dirt in the cockpit rendered the glass unusable, requiring the pilot to stick his head out the side and view the target directly. When on target, the pilot pulled a lever beside his seat to release the bombs.

Crews were expected to carry out two sorties per day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Each sortie was about two hours in length. Between sorties, the men hung out in the mess. The air was thick with unspoken tension which the young men managed with an ample dose of humour, tom-foolery and goodnatured banter. Yet privately, each was harbouring the question which had no answer: who among us will not be here by sunset?

Sorties

Will and his observer Oscar flew an unknown number of sorties at the front line. During some of those, he was pursued by German fighters. Will's slow AW160 could not hope to outrun the fighters, but he could do something they could not. He could fly slowly. Although the AW160's cruising speed was 80mph, it could slow to 35mph without stalling, well below the stall speed of German fighters, who would regularly overshoot the airborne turtle or be obliged to pull up at the last minute and bear off to avoid a collision. When they pulled up they lost speed, exposing themselves to Oscar's deadly accurate aim. This slow-fly strategy proved to be crucial to their survival and unexpectedly treacherous to German flyers.

The Mission

Through the summer of 1918 the tide of the war began to turn in favour of the Allied Forces. On 8 August the Allies began the Hundred Days Offensive, a series of 10 back-to-back battles designed to overwhelm and crush German opposition, and bring an end to the war. The battles would occur sequentially along the length of the Hindenburg Line, Germany's defensive position across central France. Will's General Rawlinson led the 8th of the 10 battles, the Battle of the Selle. The Selle England: Tales of a Time Traveler 3.30 was a river, not particularly wide or difficult to cross, were it not for the German's entrenched defensive position on the high bank opposite.

“By 11 October, the Fourth Army had closed up on the retreating Germans near Le Cateau, with the Germans taking up a new position, immediately to the east of the Selle River. General Henry Rawlinson was faced with three problems: crossing the river, the railway embankment on the far side and the ridge above the embankment. The decision was made to commence the assault at night and as the river was not very wide at this point, planks would be used for the soldiers to cross in single file. Later, pontoons would be required for the artillery to cross the river.”

“After a six-day halt for preparations and artillery bombardments Fourth Army troops attacked at 5.20 a.m. on Thursday 17 October. Infantry and tanks, preceded by a creeping barrage, moved forward on a 10 miles (16 km) front south of Le Cateau. The centre and left of the Fourth Army forced crossings of the river, despite unexpectedly strong German resistance and much uncut barbed wire. Fighting was particularly fierce along the line of the Le Cateau–Wassigny railway.” Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Selle

The success of the entire Hundred Days operation depended on each Allied sector meeting its target, as an unequal advance along the Hindenburg Line would open the Allies to attacks from the rear. Rawlinson needed a quick solution to knock out the enemy’s resistance which had allowed only limited progress on the morning of October 17. In the early afternoon, an England: Tales of a Time Traveler 3.31 order was dispatched to Squadron 8 to attack the enemy from the air. It seems only Will and Oscar were available to carry out the order. The mission: cripple enemy resistance adjacent the

centre and left flank of the 4th army's position by strafing infantry and bombing artillery and tanks.

The weather that morning was horrendous and continued so into the afternoon, when Will and Oscar received their orders. Cold driving rain and wind thrashed them as they scrambled across the field and climbed into the cockpits of their AW160.

The engine roared to life and almost immediately, the little aircraft was lifting off the grass field in a downpour. Low cloud and heavy rain persisted for the 45 minute run to the target. The cloud cover allowed only occasional glimpses of the ground, leaving Will to depend entirely on dead reckoning (estimation) to find the target. On this day, the very best of what Will was capable of was being called upon.

Then, in a brief opening in the the clouds Will spotted the target and took a bearing. Just before the target was reached, they dropped low below the clouds and swept along the line, strafing and bombing as they went. It was apparently the straw that broke the camel's back, for the Fourth Army was then able to advance, albeit in the face of continuing resistance all the way to the village of Le Cateau. By the close of day, the Fourth Army had taken Le Cateau. In the following weeks, the Allies added to their advance, retaking French villages one by one and driving the Germans back to the Northeast. On the 11th of November, Armistice was declared.

Getting Home

Confident and relieved that the mission had been accomplished, Will and Oscar headed for home. But the day's work was not over. Out of the clouds at perilously close range appeared a German observer aircraft, the crew of which was likely as surprised as Will and Oscar. Oscar Berridge:

"While on Contact patrol on the 17-10-18 almost out of gas flying in between very low clouds when a Hun two seater was seen to come out of the clouds about 50 yards distance flying away from us at right and slightly below us. The observer immediately engaged with his rear guns, getting a successful burst of fire, the enemy machine replied, the observer continued firing. E.A [Enemy aircraft] was observed to burst into flames and spin to the ground. O. Berridge SubLt Observer"

In the fray, the propellor driven fuel pump mounted directly over Will's head had exploded from gunfire. There was a hand pump back up, but Will opted to break off and head for home. Just then, a grinning, sharp-shooting Oscar Berrige tapped Will on the back and pointed down to starboard. Smoke and flames were swirling from the enemy aircraft as it dropped from sight. Will and Oscar returned safely to Malincourt Field. It had been a very long day and two young German pilots would not appear for muster in the morning.

Distinguished Flying Cross

For their efforts on breaking enemy resistance, Will and Oscar received the Distinguished Flying Cross for "gallantry and devotion to duty." Will returned

to civilian life, completed his engineering degree, then worked for Shawinigan Water and Power Company of Quebec for his entire career. That and his family were all the excitement he needed. He died at 89 in 1986.

Freddy West

Heroes in Will's Squadron 8 were not in short supply. Below is the story of Freddy West, adapted with thanks from Wikipedia: He was 22 years old. It was World War I and Freddy was already the captain of No. 8 Squadron, Royal Air Force, a grim reminder of the casualty rate among flyers. No. 8 was an observer squadron, dedicated to providing intelligence on enemy positions and fighting force to infantry and tank divisions on the front line of the Allied 4th Army.

After four years of war, battle commanders had learned the indispensable value of aerial observation. On 12 August 1918, the Allies were 4 days into the start of the largest offensive of the war, the Hundred Days Offensive. Squadron 8 was ordered to locate enemy positions. Setting off at dawn, West and his observer, Lt. William Haslam, flying an Armstrong Whitworth FK 8, spotted an enemy emplacement through a hole in the mist. At the same time, the enemy spotted them and commenced concentrated ground fire. Almost immediately, they came under attack from seven German fighters. West was hit in the leg, his radio transmitter was smashed.

Despite his injuries, West continued with his reconnaissance duties while under attack, then

manoeuvred his machine so skilfully that observer Haslam was able to register several hits on the German fighters, sufficient to drive them off. Only when he was sure of the enemy's ground position did West break off and head for home. To slow the profuse bleeding from his mangled leg, he twisted his trouser leg into a tourniquet to stem the flow of blood.

West realized he would not reach the airfield in his injured state and landed the Armstrong Whitworth in a field behind Allied lines. His left leg had five wounds, one of which had shattered his femur and cut the femoral artery. He was in an agony of pain, yet he insisted on reporting his findings forthwith. His leg was amputated.

West was returned to Britain for medical treatment and recovery and on 9 November, two days before Armistice, he received word that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross. Freddy West carried on with his military career after the war, becoming Air Commodore Ferdinand Maurice Felix West, VC, the equivalent of Brigadier-General in the Canadian Armed Forces.

William Spriggs (1898-1986)

Water & Power Engineer
Recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross

Relation: Uncle