

Biography of John Aidan Liddell

John Liddell was born 3 August 1888 at Benwell Hall, Newcastle upon Tyne as the eldest son of Emily and John Liddell a wealthy land and coal mine owner. He was educated at Frogmal Hall in Hampshire and Stonyhurst, Lancashire from 1900-1908.¹ By 1911 his parents were living at Sherfield Manor, Sherfield on Loddon near Basingstoke. He gained a degree in zoology from Balliol College, Oxford and at the age of 19 was elected a member of the Royal Astronomical Society having been Chief Assistant on an astronomical expedition to Vinaroz in Spain two years earlier and achieving high quality photographs of a total eclipse of the sun.

He joined the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in 1912 as 2nd Lieutenant and in May 1914 also enrolled at the Vickers School at Brooklands and obtained his Royal Aero Club Ticket (no 781) for flying a Vickers bi-plane.²

He was promoted to Lieutenant in July 1914 and with the outbreak of the First World War he was sent to France on 28 August in charge of the Machine Gun Section as part of the Expeditionary Force. During this time he spent 43 consecutive days in the trenches without rest or change and was mentioned in despatches for his efforts and was awarded the Military Cross in February 1915.³

In the same month he was promoted to Captain and in May of 1915 was attached to the Royal Flying Corps. By July he returned to the front and two weeks later won the Victoria Cross posthumously. His citation listed in the London Gazette 24 Aug 1915, reads:⁴

'For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty on 31 July 1915. When on a flying reconnaissance over Ostend-Bruges-Ghent he was severely wounded (his right thigh being broken), which caused momentary unconsciousness; but by a great effort he recovered partial control after his machine had dropped nearly 3,000 feet and, notwithstanding his collapsed state, succeeded, although continually fired at, in completing his course, and brought the aeroplane into our lines half an hour later after he had been wounded. The difficulties experienced by this officer in saving his machine and the life of his observer cannot be readily expressed, but as the control wheel and throttle control were smashed, and also one of the under-carriage struts, it would seem incredible that he could have accomplished his task.'

He died at La Panne, Belgium aged 27, on 3 August 1915 from septic poisoning from the wounds he received following amputation of his leg. One of his senior officers wrote of him: I cannot write much, for we all feel as if the light has gone out, the light of our battalion. You see, he was always bright. In snow, in muddy trenches, or ante-room, he kept us laughing, and his influence will last. Soldiering had little to teach or

¹ Text taken from <http://www.ancestry.co.uk> UK De Ruigny's Roll of Honour, 1914-1919 unless otherwise stated (Accessed 25 October 2014)

² <http://www.ancestry.co.uk> Great Britain, Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificates, 1910-1950 (Accessed 25 October 2015)

³ London Gazette, 18 Feb. 1915

⁴ <http://www.ancestry.co.uk> UK De Ruigny's Roll of Honour, 1914-1919 unless otherwise stated (Accessed 25 October 2014). London Gazette, 24 Aug. 1915

give to him. His, by instinct, was the great gift a soldier can possess, and he gave it freely together with his life – to soldiering.'

He was buried in the Roman Catholic section of the Basingstoke (South View or Old) Cemetery on 4 September 1915 (grave ref E. RC 2257-8).⁵ He is also remembered on several memorials throughout the country, namely, the war memorial in Sherfield on Loddon, the memorial in St Joseph's Church, Pickering, Yorkshire, on plaques in the Scottish Naval Military Residence, Edinburgh and in St Clement Dane's London. The tip of his RE5's propeller is in the Imperial War Museum and a display is held at Stonyhurst College.⁶

(For a full biography of John Aidan Liddell see *With a Smile and a Wave*, Peter Daybell, (2005).)

⁵ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2758159/LIDDELL,%20JOHN%20AIDAN> (Accessed 25 October 2015)

⁶ <http://www.ancestry.co.uk> UK, Victoria Cross Medals, 1857-2007 (Accessed 25 October 2014)