

= Robert A. Little =

Robert Alexander Little , DSO & Bar , DSC & Bar ( 19 July 1895 ? 27 May 1918 ) , a World War I fighter pilot , is generally regarded as the most successful Australian flying ace , with an official tally of forty @-@ seven victories . Born in Victoria , he travelled to England in 1915 and learned to fly at his own expense before joining the Royal Naval Air Service ( RNAS ) . Posted to the Western Front in June 1916 , he flew Sopwith Pups , Triplanes and Camels with No. 8 Squadron RNAS , achieving thirty @-@ eight victories within a year and earning the Distinguished Service Order and Bar , the Distinguished Service Cross and Bar , and the French Croix de Guerre . Rested in July 1917 , he volunteered to return to the front in March 1918 and scored a further nine victories with No. 3 Squadron RNAS ( later No. 203 Squadron RAF ) before he was killed in action on the night of 27 May , aged twenty @-@ two .

= = Early life = =

Little was born on 19 July 1895 at Hawthorn , a suburb of Melbourne , to Canadian James Little , a seller of medical and surgical books , and his Victorian @-@ born wife Susan . His family heritage was Scottish , and he was educated at Camberwell Grammar School and Scotch College , Melbourne , where he was a swimming medallist . He entered his father 's business as a travelling salesman , and was living with his family at Windsor when World War I broke out in August 1914 .

= = World War I = =

Long interested in aviation , Little decided to apply for pilot training at the Australian Army 's Central Flying School in Point Cook , but with only four vacancies , he was rejected along with hundreds of others . He then decided to sail for England in July 1915 and become a qualified pilot at his own expense . Gaining his flying certificate with the Royal Aero Club at Hendon in October , he joined the Royal Naval Air Service ( RNAS ) as a probationary flight sub @-@ lieutenant on 14 January 1916 . He suffered badly from air sickness early on , most likely brought on by fumes from castor oil that was employed as an engine lubricant in the aircraft he flew in England .

Little arrived in France in June 1916 for service with No. 1 ( Naval ) Wing at Dunkirk , where he initially flew Sopwith 1 ½ Strutters in bombing raids . He married Vera Gertrude Field at the Congregational Church , Dover , on 16 September . The next month he was posted to No. 8 Squadron RNAS ( " Naval Eight " ) flying Sopwith Pups on the Western Front , under fellow Australian Stanley Goble . Little scored his first aerial victory on 23 November , destroying an enemy two @-@ seater north @-@ east of La Bassée . By the following February , he had four victories to his credit and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross ( DSC ) for " conspicuous bravery in successfully attacking and bringing down hostile machines " . In one action on 4 December , Little and Goble " fought like mad " against a large formation of German fighters , each claiming a Halberstadt ; Little did not return to base with Goble and was thought lost , but had only landed near Allied lines to clear his jammed gun before taking off again to continue the fight .

On 24 April 1917 , Little engaged a DFW C.V , forcing it to land . He then followed the German aircraft down to claim it as captured and personally take its crew prisoner at gunpoint . The Australian flipped his own plane in a ditch after touching down , however , prompting the surrendering enemy pilot to suggest : " It looks as if I have brought you down , not you me , doesn 't it ? " Naval Eight 's conversion to the Sopwith Triplane in April saw Little begin to score heavily , eventually registering twenty @-@ four victories on the type to bring his total up to twenty @-@ eight by 10 July , including twin victories in a day on four occasions . He was the squadron 's top scorer with the Triplane , mostly in one particular airframe , N5493 , that he christened " Blymp " , which also became the nickname of his baby son . The unit then began flying Sopwith Camels , in which he scored a further ten kills in July to make fourteen all @-@ up for the month . When he subsequently rotated back to England for rest , he was ranked Flight Lieutenant and credited with a total of thirty @-@ eight victories , including fifteen destroyed or captured . A bar to his DSC had

been gazetted on 29 June , for " exceptional daring and skill in aerial fighting on many occasions " , and he received the French Croix de Guerre on 11 July , becoming ? along with fellow Australian RNAS ace Roderic ( Stan ) Dallas ? one of the first three British Empire pilots to be so decorated . In August , he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order " for exceptional skill and daring " , followed by a bar to the decoration in September for " remarkable courage and boldness in attacking enemy machines " . He was mentioned in despatches on 11 December , and promoted to flight commander the following month .

Despite Little 's prowess in combat , as an aviator he was ordinary at best , enduring a number of crash @-@ landings . What gave him his edge as a fighter pilot was his keen eye , excellent marksmanship , and willingness to single @-@ handedly take on entire enemy formations and close in on his prey ? down to twenty @-@ five yards on occasion ? before opening fire . Fellow No. 8 Squadron member Reggie Soar recalled , " Although not a polished pilot , he was one of the most aggressive ... an outstanding shot with both revolver and rifle ... " , while ace Robert Compton described Little as " not so much a leader as a brilliant lone hand ... Small in stature , with face set grimly , he seemed the epitome of deadliness " . His squadron nicknamed him " Rikki " , after the mongoose " Rikki @-@ Tikki @-@ Tavi " , which outstrikes cobras in the story of the same name by Rudyard Kipling . Many who knew him saw a sensitive side , however , Soar noting that in addition to his skill with guns , Little was " also a collector of wild flowers " , and his wife contending that his appearance in photographs belied his sense of humour . Squadron commander Raymond Collishaw , who would finish the war as the RNAS ' top @-@ scoring ace , summed up Little as " an outstanding character , bold , aggressive and courageous , yet he was gentle and kindly . A resolute and brave man . "

Following a period of rest in England , Little turned down a desk assignment and volunteered to return to action on the Western Front , joining Lieutenant Colonel Collishaw 's No. 3 Squadron RNAS in March 1918 . The unit evolved into No. 203 Squadron of the new Royal Air Force on 1 April , formed after the merger of the RNAS and the Royal Flying Corps . Now ranked captain , and again flying Sopwith Camels , Little gained a further nine successes , beginning with a Fokker Triplane on 1 April , and concluding with two kills in one day on 22 May , an Albatros and a DFW . During this stretch of victories , on 21 April 1918 , he was brought down unharmed by Friedrich Ehmann . On 27 May , Little received reports of German Gotha bombers in the vicinity , and took off on a moonlit evening to intercept the raiders . As he closed with one of the bombers , his plane was caught in a searchlight beam and he was struck by a bullet that passed through both his thighs . He crash @-@ landed in a field near N?ux , and bled to death before he was discovered the following morning by a passing gendarme . Little 's skull and ankle had also been fractured in the impact ; his body was identified by his friend and fellow ace , Charles Dawson Booker . Collishaw launched an investigation but it was never established whether the single bullet that hit Little had come from a gunner in the Gotha or from the ground .

= = Legacy = =

Little was buried in the village cemetery at N?ux , before his body was moved to Wavans British Cemetery in the Pas de Calais . Aged twenty @-@ two , he left a widow and a son ; in accordance with her husband 's wishes , Vera travelled back to Australia to raise the boy . Of Little 's forty @-@ seven confirmed victories , twenty were credited as destroyed , two as captured , and twenty @-@ five as " out of control " ; he was believed to be responsible for many others driven down or forced to land , which were not counted in his official total . As well as the eighth most successful Commonwealth ace of World War I , and the ranking RNAS ace , this score made him the most prolific Australian ace of all time , ahead of Stan Dallas with an official score of thirty @-@ nine , although modern research also credits Dallas with a tally numbering in the fifties .

The propeller blade from Little 's Sopwith Triplane was fitted with a clock in its hub by his fellow officers , who presented it to his widow ; she transported it back to Australia in three pieces and it later went on display at the Australian War Memorial , along with his awards and the wooden cross of his original burial place at N?ux . The Sopwith Pup he flew with No. 8 Squadron RNAS , N5182 ,

was rebuilt to flying standard and in October 1976 led a flypast to commemorate the squadron 's Diamond Jubilee , before going on permanent display at the Royal Air Force Museum , Hendon . One of the buildings of the Australian Defence Force Academy ( ADFA ) in Canberra , opened in 1986 , was named in Little 's honour .