

**ONE POPPY FOR MICHAEL HUBERT THUNDER:
BOER WAR POW; ROYAL FLYING CORPS KIA**

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by James M. Thunder

I write this for today, Veteran's Day in the United States and Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom. The day in both countries used to be called Armistice Day, the day the armistice was signed to end the Great War, now called World War I. You might recall seeing some dramatic photos from November 11, 2014. It was the day that the last of 886,247 ceramic poppies were placed in the moat around the Tower of London to commemorate that number of dead from the United Kingdom, Australia and the British Commonwealth during World War I. This work of outdoor art was called "Blood-Swept Lands and Sea of Red." One of those poppies represented the subject of this essay, Michael Hubert Thunder.



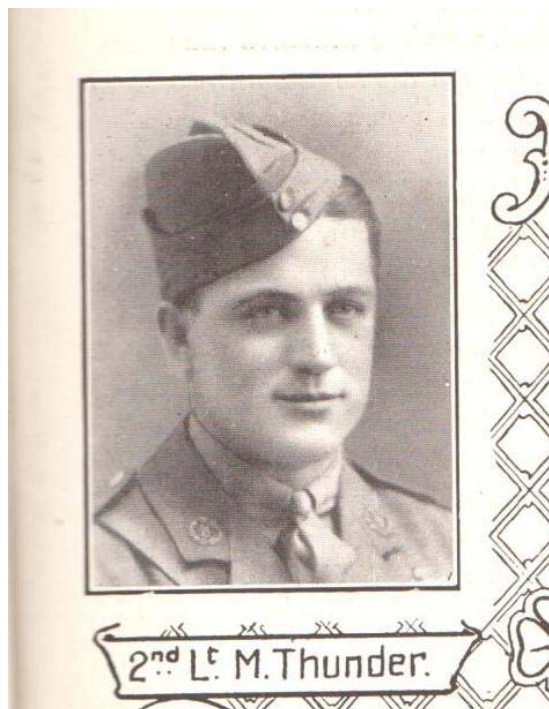
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-sea-of-poppies-to-honour-the-fallen>

My late father called his father's brother "Uncle Mick." Whenever he spoke of him, he did it in hushed, reverent tones. Since his Uncle Mick died in 1916, when my father was but three, my father, in speaking in hushed, reverent tones all his life, must have been mimicking his father.

My father and his four siblings, living in Berkeley in 1916, never met Uncle Mick. His father, James, and the brother, Mick, separated when James emigrated to America and Mick didn't. My father knew next to nothing about Uncle Mick. He knew he'd been a prisoner of war in the

Boer War, that he had been a gentleman jockey while working as an executive for a tin mining operation in Malaysia, and that he had died as a Royal Flying Corps pilot in World War I.

Through the wonders of the Internet, I've been able to learn many details of his story. I will limit this essay to his military service, in the Boer War and in World War I. Here's one thing I discovered: Young journalist Winston Churchill would have been taken prisoner a *second* time if he had accompanied Uncle Mick's battalion rather than another battalion.



The Clongowian 1917

Mick and my grandfather James were sons of George F. Thunder, a British Army officer, a veteran of the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1879-80), who was stationed much of the time in India, and his wife, Margaret Pugin Purcell Thunder. She was the daughter of A.W. Pugin (1812-1852), the Gothic Revivalist. She'd been married to a Judge Purcell and came to her second marriage with four children. My grandfather was born in 1879 in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Mick in Ramsgate, UK, on September 5, 1880.¹

The two boys would visit (or reside in?) the home of their maternal grandmother, at "The Grange," in Ramsgate, on the Strait of Dover between the North Sea and the English Channel. The home had been designed by Pugin. In their early years, they attended La Sainte Union Catholic School, a boarding school in Bathwick.² From 1893 to 1897, they attended a Jesuit boarding school 37 km west of Dublin called Clongowes Wood College.³ Their father's family lived at "Lagore,"

¹ 1881 Census.

² 1891 Census.

³ Archives, Clongowes Wood College.

near Ratoath, 34 km to the northeast (northwest of Dublin). (His father had 13 siblings, two of whom died young. His mother had seven siblings.) The two boys attended the school with two first cousins, also named Thunder. The four Thunder boys were schoolmates of James Joyce and you'll find a character named Cecil Thunder in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).⁴

I have no information about Uncle Mick for the 2-1/2 years between the time he left Clongowes and the time he volunteered for the Boer War.



From *The Clongowian* when Uncle Mick was a “secretary” of Class of 1897.

BOER WAR POW

Knowing that Uncle Mick had been a Boer War prisoner of war was enough to suggest to me that he may, just may, have been held prisoner with then journalist Winston Churchill. The answer is: They weren't prisoners at the same time. Amazingly, however, I learned that Churchill would have been taken prisoner a *second* time if he had accompanied Uncle Mick's battalion, rather than a battalion a few weeks earlier, into a town called Lindley. Here's the rest of that story:

The 13th Battalion of the Imperial Yeomanry (“IY”) was a volunteer force “raised” in late 1899/early 1900 for one year's duration. Uncle Mick, 19 years of age, joined as a private, service number 9649. The Battalion consisted of four companies. Uncle Mick was in the 45 (Dublin a/k/a Irish Hunt) Company of 126 men.

⁴ The book saw its genesis in 1904 and Joyce could have been influenced not only by James and Mick and their first cousins, but also Cecil (student: 1889-1894) and Herbert (student: 1890-1892), both from Dublin.



Insignia Collection of the SA National Museum of Military History

Example of a shoulder title of the 13th Battalion, Imperial Yeomanry.



**Original Caption: Dublin volunteers abd Duke of Connaught Yeomanry [“abd” in original]
This is not Michael Thunder’s military unit, but we can assume there would have been a similar scene with his outfit.**

The Battalion arrived in South Africa between February and April 1900. 45 Company arrived on *The Montrose* in Cape Town.

The entire Battalion surrendered on May 31, 1900, to the Boers. A military historian, writing in 2011, described the event beginning with these words. Please observe that Churchill was with Col. Hamilton’s battalion.

On 19 May 1900, Hamilton’s force entered Lindley. With them was a young correspondent, Winston Churchill, working for *The Morning Post*. He describes what he saw: ‘The houses - white walls and blue-grey roofs of iron, were tucked away at the bottom of a regular cup, and partly hidden by dark Australian trees ... [It] is a typical South African town, with a large central market square and four or five broad unpaved streets radiating therefrom. There is a small clean-

looking hotel, a substantial gaol, a church and a school house. The town's folk were unwelcoming, except for the British inhabitants one of whom owned two shops.' Churchill went to the home of one of them. Above the doorway hung a Union Jack.

'I advise you to take that down', said Churchill.

'Why?' asked the resident, 'The British are going to keep the country, aren't they?'

'This column is not going to stay here forever.'

'But surely they will leave some soldiers behind to protect us, to hold the town?'

Churchill wrote: 'I told him I thought it unlikely. Ours is a fighting column.

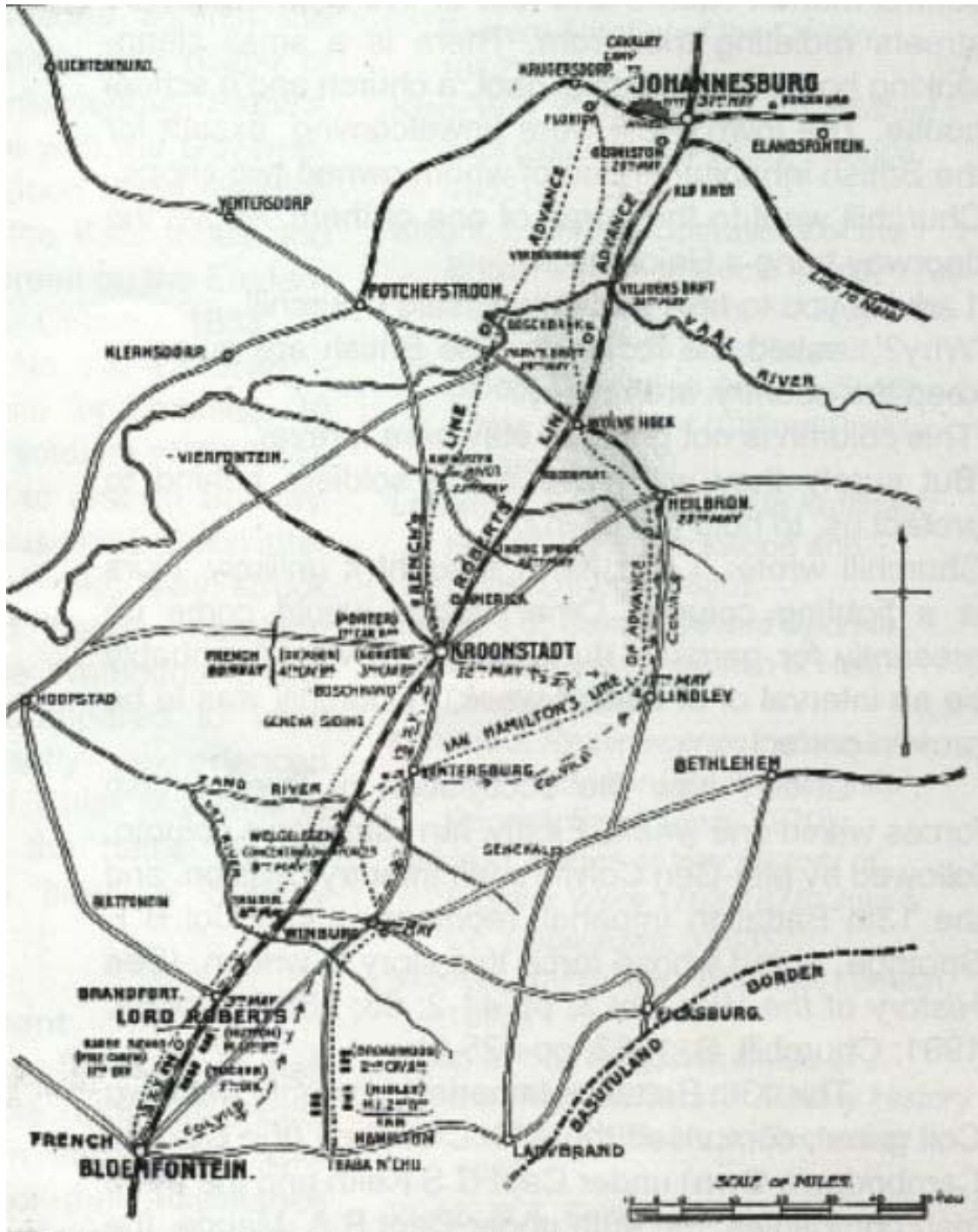
Other troops would come up presently for garrison duty. But there would probably be an interval of at least a week'. Churchill was to be proven correct.

Lindley saw the occupation of three British forces within one week: Firstly, Ian Hamilton's column, followed by Maj-Gen Colvile's 9th Infantry Division, and the 13th Battalion Imperial Yeomanry under Col B E Spragge, about whose force this story is written. (See *History of the War*, Vol 3, pp 41-2; 63; 538-9; Colvile, 1901; Churchill, S, 1962, pp 525-6).⁵

**The map below appears in the 2011 article and bears this notation:
MAP A: BRITISH ADVANCE BLOEMFONTEIN - JOHANNESBURG, MAY 1900
by columns of I. Hamilton, H. Colvile, B.E. Spragge (13 I.Y.), J. French.
(From Creswicke, Louis: *South Africa and the Transvaal War Vol V*).
*Map annotated from Churchill, W, Ian Hamilton's March;
Colvile, H E The Work of the 9th Division;
Reckitt, F N The Lindley Affair.***

**Lindley is almost directly east of Kroonstadt in the middle of the map.
A dotted line shows Hamilton's advance and a dashed line shows Colvile's.**

⁵ Steve Watt, "The Lindley Affair: The Capture of the 13th Battalion Imperial Yeomanry by the Boer Forces," *Military History Journal* (The South African Military History Society), vol. 15, no. 3, June 2011, <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol153sw.html>



About March 31, the 45th went to Karoo where the 47th Company was. They trained for five weeks. They took the train to Bloemfontain with the 54th Company. On May 23, the Battalion went by rail to Ventersburg. "Owing to the delays in supplying the 13th Battalion IY with forage, it was not possible for Col. Spragge to join Colville at Ventersburg. Instead, his battalion proceeded, by order, to Kroonstad where it arrived on 25 May. The route taken caused a division in the

battalion: The 47th Company forded the Sand (Zand) River since the railway bridge was destroyed and marched to Kroonstad, while the 45th, 46th and 54th Companies, departing a day later, crossed the river via the deviation bridge and proceeded directly by rail to Kroonstad. (See Map A; *History of the War*; Vol 3, p 115; *Times History*, Vol 4, p 253; Reckitt,1973, pp 11-12).” The 2011 article continues:

* * *

The evening of 25 May, having obtained two days' rations, the whole of the 13th Battalion of 468 men of all ranks began its march from Kroonstad to Lindley, a distance of 75 km.

* * *

On Sunday, 27 May, the Yeomanry arrived at Lindley. They saw, at a distance, the dust of a column heading northward, which, they were told in Lindley, had left that morning. This was indeed Colvile's column, which the 13th Bn Imperial Yeomanry had been instructed to join. While the town seemed deserted, the Boers had reoccupied it after Colvile left and then moved to the hills to the south, waiting for the Yeomanry.

* * *

Soon after sunrise on 28 May, the Boers commenced firing from positions occupied by them to the south, west and north of the British position where the 47th Company and Lord Longford's 45th Company came within rifle range.

On May 29, an officer and 16 men, of an unidentified company, were sent to push the Boers back to enlarge the forage area for the British horses. They were surrounded and captured on May 30. On May 31, the head of 45 Company, Captain the Earl of Langford and 50 men (half of the company) were tasked with retaking the area and did so with a bayonet charge. Then they withdrew in the face of an artillery piece.

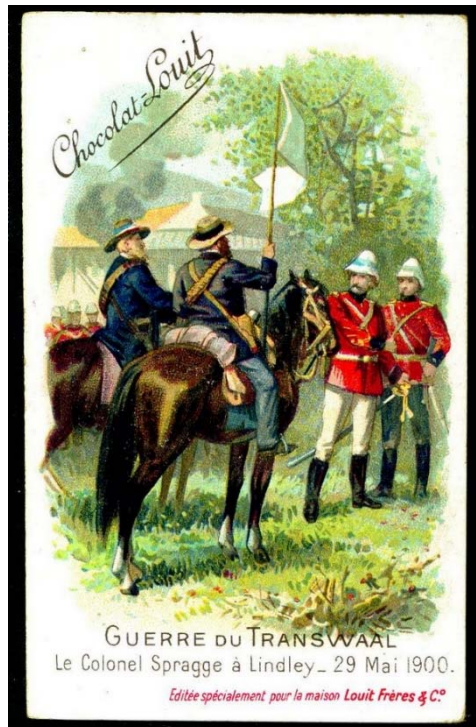
One soldier, without authorization, waved a white flag to surrender. His commanding officer, in another location, decided he was compelled by his subordinate's action to surrender. Then the colonel, Spragge, decided that, without those units, the British position could not be maintained. “Lord Longford, with the 45th Company to the north, and Capt Maude, with the 46th Company in the west, held out for a little longer but they too finally surrendered. All firing ceased at about 14.00.”

This same military historian, in a 2006 article, summarized the “Lindley Affair” in this manner:

The fight at Lindley was a humiliation for the British. The 13th IY of 500 men under the command of Lt-Col B Spragge had been ordered to join the 9th Infantry Division under Gen Sir H Colvile at Kroonstad. Due to a mix-up in communications Spragge claimed he was sent a telegram but Colvile denied sending one - the battalion entered the town of Lindley on the afternoon of 27 May 1900. Instead of meeting up with Colvile, Spragge encountered, to his horror, a large group of Boers. He made the decision to hold a group of hills

outside the town and to await help. Over the next three days, the situation grew rapidly worse. Spragge was surrounded and had to endure rifle fire from all sides, while the number of Boers under Commandant P de Wet and General Prinsloo continued to grow, and they brought artillery to bear on the besieged. The position became untenable and, with no chance of holding out, Spragge surrendered with a loss of 27 IY killed or died of wounds. Amongst the dead was Capt Sir J E C Power (the Earl of Leitrim), a whiskey baronet (Pakenham, 1979, p436). The Boers captured over 400 men. To make matters worse, the surrendered battalion, the 13th, were the Duke of Cambridge's Own and three Irish companies. These men symbolised the wealth and power that had been associated with the IY corps (Asplin, 2000, p6).⁶

There were three formal inquiries into the Langley debacle, held in September 1900. One of the subjects was Capt. Lord Longford of the 45 Company.⁷



**Chocolate Louit, "The Transvaal War" (2nd Boer War) c1902.
Surrender of Colonel Spragge at Lindley, 29th May [sic: May 31] 1900**

⁶ Steve Watt (of Pietermaritzburg), *The Imperial Yeomanry – Part One-1900* [first of three parts, each devoted to a different contingent and year], *Military History J.*, vol. 13, no. 6, Dec. 2006, published by The South African Military History Society, <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol136sw.html>.

⁷ Id.

Was the family story true, namely that Mick Thunder was a prisoner? And, if so, where was he held and when was he released? Furthermore his obituary in *The Clongowian* of 1917, pasted much further below, states he was wounded. Was he?

We just read the account that his entire company, indeed his entire battalion, surrendered. But was he among them? I can confirm that he was a prisoner, the location (at least one) of his imprisonment, and the duration of his imprisonment. I cannot confirm that he was wounded since the UK does not have the equivalent of the American Purple Heart and I no reports, online or in the papers, list him as having been wounded.

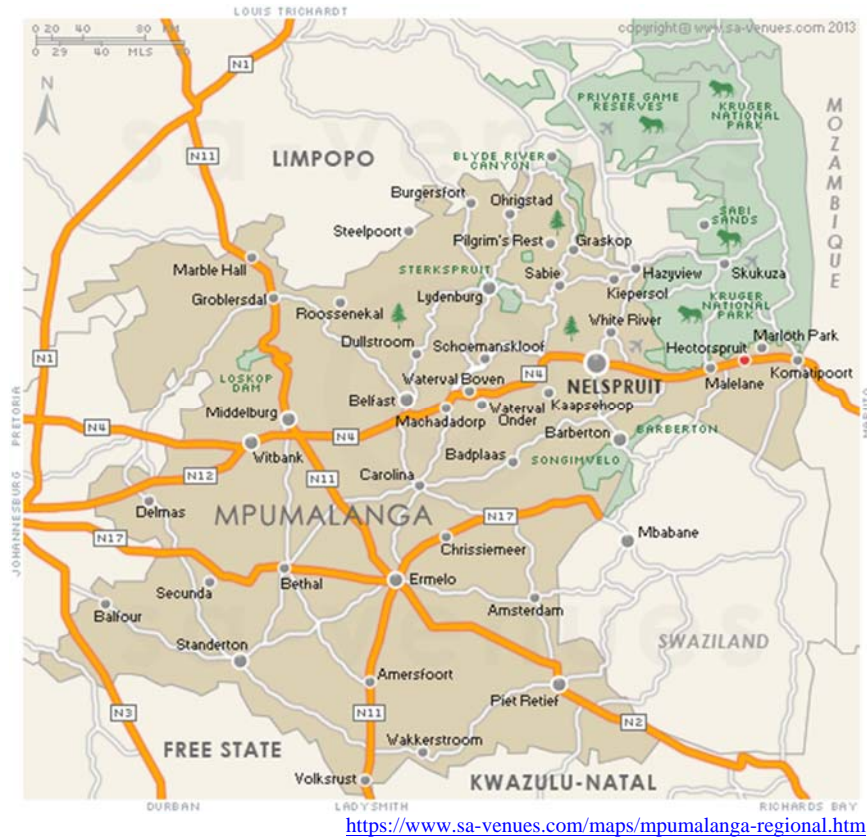
By military unit, and by name and service number, Uncle Mick appears on page 9 of the September 21, 1900 edition of the *Times* of London, as a prisoner of the Boers who had been released from a prison in Nooitgedacht. This was the third installment of names published in the *Times* in consecutive days. The first, of September 19, and the third, both gave the date of release as September 5. The second installment does not give a date of release. But September 5 does not jive with earlier reports of the paper, namely, that 1800 men had been released on August 30⁸ with a smattering of others released earlier (for example, due to illness or injury) or later.

There were a number of reports in the *Times* of London in June, July and August that provided some of the names of the prisoners and injured and killed, most especially a very long list published on August 23, page 8, but Thunder's name does not appear on any of them. So, we do not know if he was among the first to appear at Nooitgedacht, or spent some time at Waterval Boven, before or after Nooitgedacht, or any time in Rhenoster Spruit.

Where was Nooitgedacht? Current maps place it east of, and close to, Cape Town. But Cape Town was held by the British. And Nooitgedacht is 1200 km from Lindley. So, I suspected that the current town named Nooitgedacht was likely not the location of Uncle Mick's imprisonment. As it happens, in my research to confirm Uncle Mick's imprisonment, the *Times* of June 8, p. 14, gives its location as a farm and a railway station midway between Pretoria and Delagoa Bay (now called Maputo Bay, Mozambique), 40 miles south of Lydenburg (currently also known as Mashishing).

**Below: Current map showing Lydenburg in the middle with Waterval Boven slightly to south.
The prison at Nooitgedacht was 40 miles south of Lydenburg.**

⁸ *Times*, Aug. 31, 1900, p. 3 (all released and marching to Waterval Bowen); Sept. 1, 1900, p. 3 (report of Aug. 31 stating they were released on Aug. 30).



The *Times* characterized Nootgedacht as an “unhealthy spot”⁹ (apparently because it was subject to malaria during warm weather). The men were initially held in a “fenced enclosure” with no shelter, but with blankets and food.¹⁰ It was cold (at the start of Southern Hemisphere autumn), with the men wearing summer clothes. Food was almost solely “mealie porridge.”¹¹ By early July, the cold was “severe” and the men had “primitive huts.”¹²

In 1971, a U.S. Government research paper on the repatriation of prisoners stated in summary fashion, citing three sources, that these prisoners were released without conditions.¹³ My research revealed, however, that there were no conditions made because the release was due to a British advance that caused the Boers to abandon their position.¹⁴ When the guards let the British prisoners go, they merely requested that the prisoners be kind to the Boer farmers.¹⁵

⁹ *Times*, June 8, 1900, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Times*, June 12, 1900, p. 5.

¹¹ *Times*, June 15, 1900, p.5; June 19, p. 5.

¹² *Times*, July 3, 1900, p. 5.

¹³ Charles H. Murray, “Prisoners of War: Repatriation or Internment During Wartime: American and Allied Experience, 1775 to Present” (1971), p. 2, n.2. https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/CRS_Prisoners-of-War_report.pdf One source is: Armand du Payrat, *Le Prisonnier de Guerre Dans La Guerre Continentale* (1910).

¹⁴ *Times*, Sept. 1, 1900, p.7.

¹⁵ *Times*, Sept. 8, 1900, p.5.

Short of food and clothing and shelter, they walked from the date of their release on August 30 until they were all in a British camp as of September 3.¹⁶



**Original caption to this postcard: "1900 England Nobility in Nooitgedacht Prison"
(publisher: Kilburn)**

¹⁶ *Times*, Sept. 4, 1900, p. 7.

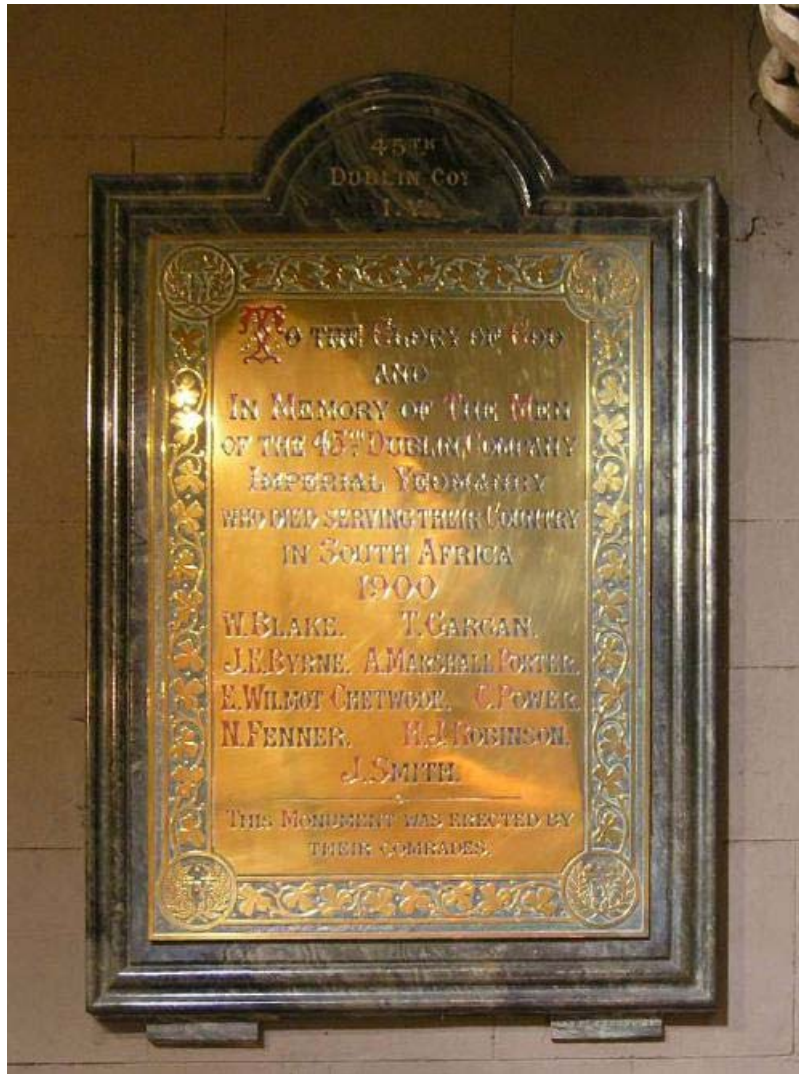


BRITISH PRISONERS WAITING FOR RELEASE: THE CAMP AT NOOITGEDACHT
Drawing by Frank Dadd, R.I., from a Sketch by Lieut. Essex Capell, one of the Prisoners

Fifty thousand men who served in South Africa during the (Second) Boer War, 1899-1902, received the Queen's South Africa (QSA) Medal recipient, pictured below. Uncle Mick is listed as among one of its recipients.¹⁷



¹⁷ ¹⁷ https://www.angloboerwar.com/?option=com_content&view=article&id=2366. This website lists the 126 members of 45 Company, including several deceased who were killed in action or died of their wounds, but none is listed as wounded.



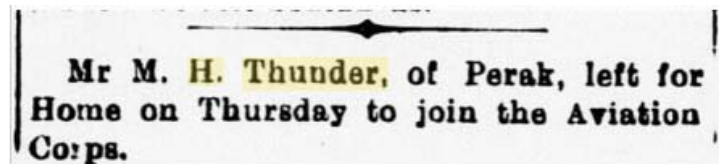
This memorial, on a wall within St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, commemorates the soldiers of the 45th Dublin Company Imperial Yeomanry, the unit to which Private Michael Thunder belonged, who gave their lives in the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902).

Churchill's imprisonment was from November 1899 to his escape on January 24, 1900. He had been embedded with the South African Light Horse Regiment. When he returned to work, he joined *Hamilton's* battalion, as mentioned above. If he had joined Uncle Mick's battalion under Col. Spragge, he would have been captured a second time in six months.

WORLD WAR I

As noted, Uncle Mick found his way to Malaysia, at least as early as 1902.¹⁸ In 1913, a cousin, medical doctor Wilfrid Thunder joined Mick and Wilfrid's brother Bernard in Malaysia. All three of them returned to the UK for the war. Here is the announcement of Mick's departure from *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* of October 19, 1915:

IN THE TRENCHES.



The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (1884-1942)
19 October 1915, Page 10¹⁹

The following obituary appears both at a link dealing with the veterans of the Great War buried at Ramsgate, Kent, England,²⁰ and in the find-a-grave website.²¹ There is no mention of Clongowes.

Second Lieutenant MICHAEL H. F. THUNDER, of the R.F.C., who died at Norwich from burns received in a flying accident, was buried at Ramsgate on September 29th with military honours. He was the son of the late Mr. George Thunder, of Lagore, Meath, and grandson, on his mother's side, of Pugin, the architect. He was educated at St. Augustine's College, Ramsgate; he had his commission in December, 1915, and was gazetted flying officer in March of this year. Six officers of the Flying Corps acted as bearers, and the officer in command arrived by aeroplane.

From 51 Squadron History Society by Neil Smith of Edinburgh²²

Lt. Thunder was the first airman to be killed serving with 51 squadron and the only 51 squadron airman to be killed in action during the Great War (that I have managed to find so far).

Born the 6th September 1879 in Ramsgate, Kent the son of Major George Thunder of the 7th Battalion Royal Fusiliers and Margaret Pugin. He had a private education, qualified as a mining engineer and spent some time working in Argentina and Malaya before returning to the UK. He joined the Royal Flying

¹⁸ Passenger List, Glenlogan March 24, 1902.

¹⁹ <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/singfreepressb19151019-1.2.52.aspx>

²⁰ http://janetandrichardsgenealogy.co.uk/great_war_dead_buried_in_ramsgat.html.

²¹ [https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-](https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=thunder&GSby=1882&GSbyrel=before&GSdy=1916&GSdyrel=in&GScntry=5&GSob=n&GRid=114812478&df=all&)

<bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=thunder&GSby=1882&GSbyrel=before&GSdy=1916&GSdyrel=in&GScntry=5&GSob=n&GRid=114812478&df=all&>

²² <http://www.51squadron.com/HistoryTeam.html>

Corps and qualified as a Pilot on the 16th January 1916 at the Military School in Ruislip, Surrey later to join the newly created RFC 51 Squadron.

51 Squadron formed at Thetford, Norfolk, on 15 May 1916 as a Home Defence unit. The Squadron flew BE2s and BE12s on anti-Zeppelin patrols, the unit also providing night flying training for newly qualified pilots with Avro 504Ks. From September 1916, units of 51 Squadron Home Defence were based at Marham but also used airfields dotted about the county for training exercises such as night flying. (Mattishall, Earsham, Freethorpe, Gooderstone, Warren, Mousehold Heath, Saxthorpe, Sedgeford, Sporle, Tottenhill and West Rudham).

On the 24th September 1916 Lt. Thunder scrambled from Mattishall to intercept an attack from a dozen Zeppelin airships that were reported to have crossed the North Sea to attack London and the East coast.

According to the cause of death from his death certificate he failed to gain enough height on takeoff and crashed:

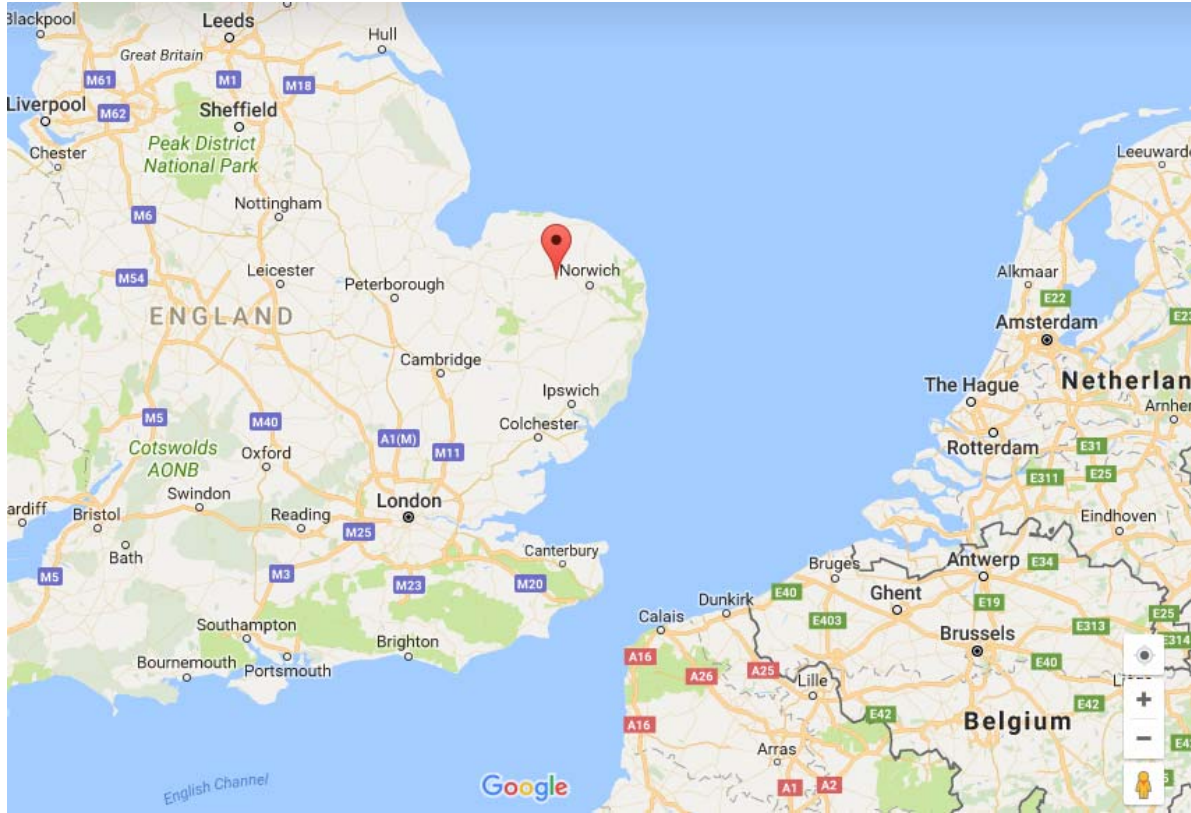
Cause of Death: Accidently burnt and his death was occasioned through the petrol of an aeroplane he was flying becoming ignited after colliding with a tree and falling to the ground.

There are reports that say that although badly burnt he managed to crawl away from the aircraft to a nearby hedgerow bank where he was picked up and taken to Thorpe St. Andrew War Hospital in Norwich where he later died of his injuries.

Michael Thunder's second claim to fame is that he was the grandson of Augustus Northmore Welsby Pugin leading architect of Victorian Britain and famous for his Gothic style of architecture in many churches around the country, not forgetting his most famous work the Palace of Westminster in London.

2nd Lt. Michael Thunder now rests with his grandfather in St. Augustine's Church, Ramsgate which was also designed by Augustus.

The following is a map pinpointing the airfield of Mattishall near Norfolk from which Uncle Mick attempted takeoff.



**Above: BE2, one of two aircraft flown by 51 Squadron.
“BE” is not “British Empire,” but “Bleriot Experimental.”²³**

Below: BE12, the other.

²³ <http://www.mattishall-village.co.uk/airfield-1.htm>



Fairly Current Picture of Mattishall Airfield²⁴

The following screenshots are excerpts (that could not be copied and pasted) from <http://www.mattishall-village.co.uk/airfield-1.htm>.

²⁴ Mattishall, Airfields of Britain, <http://www.abct.org.uk/airfields/airfield-finder/mattishall>.

MATTISHALL AIRFIELD 1916-1919

The airfield known as Mattishall Airfield, was situated mostly in East Tuddenham, with a smaller part in Mattishall and a much smaller part in Welborne.

In 1916, Mattishall was a large village with plenty of shops, public houses and a large church situated on the Tuddenham side of the village. The church with its tower was a good landmark for pilots attempting to find the nearby airfield.

The Home Defence Line

The airfield was built after a decision by the War Office to build a line of airfields stretching from Hull to London, called the Home Defence Line, to combat the ever-increasing raids by German Zeppelins, which were flying over England with impunity and terrorising the civilian population.

The massive Zeppelins, six times as long as Mattishall Church is high, had already been seen by villagers on starlit nights; and the noise from the airships' throbbing diesel engines was frequently heard. The reason why Mattishall was selected as part of the defence system, was because it was equidistant from Hull and London and in the centre of the line of defence. The site where the airfield was situated was a large 80-acre field behind Tollgate Farm, on the left-hand side of the road leading to Norwich and well-positioned for fighter aircraft to defend the centre area of Norfolk.

The two other airfield sites in Norfolk were Marham and Great Yarmouth, the latter already a sea-plane base that had been built to provide protection for Britain's North Sea Fleet. This aerial defence system was built only twelve years after the first manned flight by American Orville Wright, on December 17th, 1903, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

The Construction of Mattishall Airfield - 1916

At this time, my grandparents, aunts and uncles lived at Tollgate Farm and the first indication of an airfield being built was in early 1916, when lorries and personnel arrived one morning and started to erect tents within a few yards from the back door of the farmhouse.

My grandmother asked what was going on and was told that an aerodrome was to be built in close proximity to the farm. Indignant, she insisted that they move further from the backdoor, which they did, selecting an area at the end of the farmhouse paddock.

The 80-acre field, known as the Great Field, was short grass, having been previously used for sheep grazing. The shepherd was a Mr. Basey from East Tuddenham.

The constructors used a Steam Roller (Number 4, driven by a Mr. Gambling) from Norwich Corporation, at Westwick Depot, to make a hard roadway onto the airfield and another roadway leading into the farm paddock. It was also used for general levelling work around the site.

Arrival of No. 38 Squadron, R.F.C.

The first aircraft flown from Mattishall Airfield belonged to the No. 38 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, with one Flight at Mattishall, one at Marham and a third at Tydd St. Mary, near Wisbech in Lincolnshire.

The aircraft flown by the squadron at this period, were very slow BE2c biplanes armed with a single Lewis gun and small bombs carried in the cockpit. The bombs were for dropping on the Zeppelin airships if it was possible.

The airfield soon became operational with six biplanes and two mobile search-lights. The search-lights were sent out most nights and positioned at Honingham and Yaxham. The lights helped to deter the Zeppelins and also assisted the pilots in finding the airfield at the end of a night patrol.

At first, the RFC personnel stationed at Mattishall Airfield were billeted in tents and local buildings: the lower ranks being in tents and the officers living at Mr. Eason's Green Farm and at Mrs. Claxton's Barrack Yard at East Tuddenham.

A well was bored; latrines; ablutions; bath sheds; and two long wooden huts for officers were erected at the Mattishall side of the farm. Four similar huts were erected for the other ranks at the Tuddenham side. Behind the farmhouse, a hut called the Power House was built to house a generator to provide electricity and to pump water from the well. At the same time, a guard but was erected at the entrance to the farm paddock.

Other huts for stores and cookhouse were built; as well as two hangers and workshops, all to high specifications. The huts were sectional and made at Boulton and Paul, Norwich.



An interesting and horrifying account is recorded by Frederick Libby the first American ace of World War 1, on his experience in the plane.

"When you stood up to shoot all of you from the knees up was exposed to the elements. There was no belt to hold you. Only your grip on the gun and the sides of the nacelle stood between you and eternity. Towards the front of the nacelle was a hollow steel rod with a swivel mount to which the gun was anchored. This gun covered a huge field of fire forward. Between the observer and the pilot a second gun was mounted, for firing over the FE-2b's upper wing to protect the aircraft from rear attack.... Adjusting and shooting this gun required that you stand right up out of the nacelle with your feet on the nacelle coaming. You had nothing to worry about except being blown out of the aircraft by the blast of air or tossed out bodily if the pilot made a wrong move. There were no parachutes and no belts".

These small aircraft were often taking off and landing in total darkness and patrolling the night skies over Norfolk and its coastline. Often after flying at operational height, on landing the pilots had to be carried from their cockpits, which were completely open, suffering from intense cold.

There were several accidents on and around the air field planes were frequently coming into land and finishing up on their nose. A Lieut Thunder crashed on the Mattishall side of Blind Lane and was immediately engulfed in flames. The pilot, injured and severely burnt, managed to crawl to the nearside bank. He was taken to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital but was pronounced dead on arrival. Regular training flights were made between Mattishall and Marham, they would follow the Dereham - King's Lynn railway line.

Night Operations

The German Zeppelins came over at night, so the squadron pilots had to take off and land in darkness, a hazardous operation. To assist them to pin-point the landing strip a flare-path of paraffin-soaked rags in oil drums were lit by one of the groundcrew running along the lines of drums with a lighted rag on a stick. Later, the airfield was illuminated at night by small portable searchlights.

Accidents were frequent. On one occasion, a Lieut. Thunder crashed on the Mattishall side of Blind Lane and the plane was immediately engulfed in flames. The pilot, injured and severely burnt, managed to crawl to the nearside bank. He was taken to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital but was unfortunately pronounced dead on arrival. Other crash sites were behind Burgh Farm and behind Crossroads Farm. These sites are either side of Welborne Church Lane.

Accidents also happened on the Airfield, one plane coming into land finished completely upside down and others finished up on their nose.

As the defences became more efficient the German Zeppelin crews became more wary and began flying higher in the night sky. On a number of occasions they made attempts to bomb the airfield but only one bomb out of several dropped actually landed on the field, the others landing close to the village.

The Closure of Mattishall Airfield

The end of the Great War saw the demise of Mattishall Airfield. The airmen were soon demobbed and only three soldiers were left to guard the Field and its equipment. This was a boring job for the soldiers but one day rapid firing from a machine gun was heard in the village and it is assumed the soldiers had found something to do to occupy their time.

A large auction was arranged and all huts and surplus equipment was sold. Some of the huts were used as village halls and others as farm buildings.

The only evidence of the airfield today is the two overgrown roadways, one leading to the old airfield and one into the farm paddock. The small green Pay Hut where the airmen queued for their pay is still standing in its original position opposite the farmhouse.

The footings of some of the airfield buildings are still there below ground and are avoided when the old airfield is ploughed every year. A 1939-45 Second World War Pill Box can easily be seen from halfway down Blind Lane. This appears to be guarding the old airfield.

Notes:

In 1940, a German plane dropped several bombs on the big field opposite the Tollgate, 200 yards away. Some bombs failed to explode and were dealt with by the Army bomb disposal squad. The road was closed at Mattishall and East Tuddenham and everyone had to be evacuated from nearby houses (while the squad made the bombs harmless) except Grandad Bingham who would not move and continued to dig his garden on the big field, 150 yards away, while the bombs were made safe.

One American B24 bomber crashed in Mattishall in the last war (1944) down by the side of Blind Lane, within 300 yards of Lieut. Thunder's fatal crash. The B24 caught fire but eight of the crew escaped but unfortunately the pilot and co-pilot were burnt to death whilst strapped in their seats.

There is a long blog site thread that starts about 2007 with the last entry dated 2013, solely devoted to Lieut. Thunder. It identifies the Zeppelins that flew to the UK the night of September 23/24 1916.²⁵

²⁵ <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/topic/88383-rfc-take-off-accident-died-of-burns/>

German Navy airships L13, L14, L16, L17, L21, L22, L23, L24, L30, L31, L32 and L33 set out to bomb London and the Midlands on the night of 23/24 September 1916.

In Cheesman and Cole's authoritative *The Air Defence of Britain 1914-1918* the authors report: "No details have been traced of the take-off crash in which Thunder was killed".

The same website discusses what model of plane Uncle Mick was flying and whether there was an observer on board, the placement of fuel behind pilot, and the kind of ammunition that would have been used. It refers to a report by another pilot that downed one of the Zeppelins that night. There is also a quote of the death certificate obtained by one of the authors, and a quote from the September 29, 1916, *Norfolk Chronicle* which, by its contents, is presumed by the person posting it to relate to the Lieutenant:

CO Major H Wyllie from 18.7.1916 to 11.9.1917

just had a look at Vol 3 of H A Jones "The War in the Air" and found an account of one of the successful British pilots that night (23/24 Sep 1916). He was flying a BE2c (number 4112) and shot down Zeppelin L32 (see Gareth's post above). To do this he fired three drums along the length of the airship, the drums loaded with a mixture of Brock, Pomeroy and Tracer ammunition²⁶

It is difficult for us to recall a time when bombs were not dropped from the air because there were no aircraft. In research I conducted on a different project I found this law review article: Paul Williams, 1929 "Legitimate Targets in Aerial Bombardment," *Am. J. Int'l L.* 570, based on the world's new experience of bombing from the air during the Great War and his examination of the advancements in technology in the 10 years since that war had concluded.

Here is the death certificate and a report in the *Norfolk Chronicle*:

Death Certificate

24th Sept 1916

Thorpe St Andrew Norfolk War Hospital R.D,

Cause of Death:

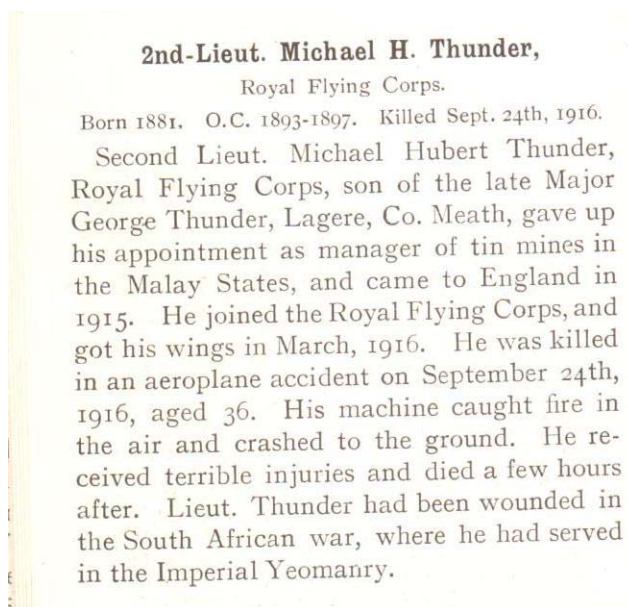
Accidentally burnt and his death was occasioned through the petrol of an aeroplane he was flying becoming ignited after colliding with a tree and falling to the ground.

²⁶ The following source, however, states that it was not Zeppelin L32 but LZ74 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Zeppelins#LZ_62 and see entry at the same webpage for LZ76 same night.

FLYING OFFICER KILLED

An inquest was held this week on the body of a flying officer, who died from injuries following a mishap late on Saturday night. The Coroner told the jury that the deceased was brought to the Hospital in a severely injured condition. It appeared that he had been flying in the dark, when the machine collided with a tree. That caused the machine to come to the ground, and for some reason or other the petrol took fire. Deceased was very badly burned, and died a few hours after having been admitted to the Hospital. Margaret Eileen Gladstone, of Dane Court Lodge, Broadstairs,²⁷ wife of Charles Elsdon Gladstone, Captain RN, and sister of the deceased, gave evidence of identification. Her brother, who was 36, was a second-lieutenant in the RFC. He returned to England from the Straits Settlement just before Christmas last, and joined the RFC at the beginning of the present year. Deceased was a native of co. Meath.²⁸ A verdict of accidental death was returned.

The following was in the *Clongowian* of 1917:

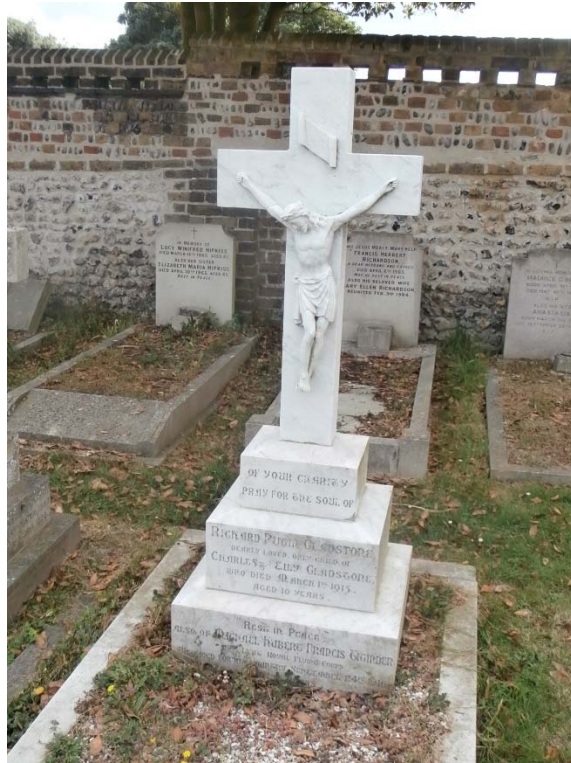


I have not found any information on the number of combat flights flown by Lieut. Thunder.

Margaret Eileen Gladstone ("Eily"), Uncle Mick's half-sister from their mother's first marriage, and her husband, provided a place for Uncle Mick's remains in the same plot of earth as their recently deceased child. The cemetery is in the churchyard of the church his maternal grandfather had designed and purchased.

²⁷ This is a town, also on the sea, about three miles from Ramsgate.

²⁸ County Meath is a reference to the family home of his father, outside Dublin and near Clongowes.



Find-a-Grave

St. Augustine Cemetery, Ramsgate

**The middle stone is inscribed:
 “Richard Pugin Gladstone
 Dearly Loved Only Child of
 Charles and Eily Gladstone
 Who Died March 1, 1915
 Aged 10 Years”**



**“Rest in Peace
 Also, of Michael Hubert Francis Thunder
 ?? Royal Flying Corps
 Died for the Country September 24th, 1916”**



Family Photo

Michael Hubert Thunder, dated January 16, 1916

Michael Hubert Thunder died without having married and without having children. One of his nieces, Eileen Thunder Allen, just turned 100 this year. She is the last of Uncle Mick's nieces and nephews.

Like my grandfather, whose brother Mick was, and like my father whose uncle Mick was, I speak of him today in hushed, reverent tones.