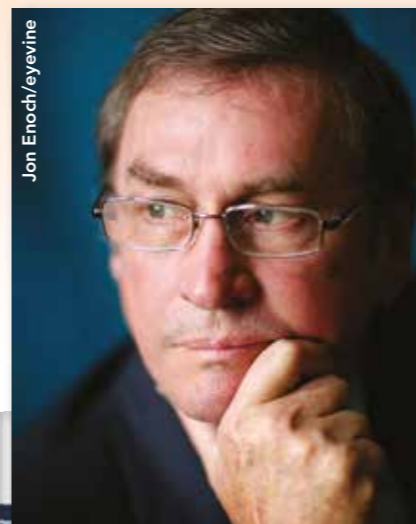




SECOND LIEUTENANT WILLIAM RHODES-MOORHOUSE VC

It is remarkable that just over a decade after the famous Wright brothers, Orville and Willbur, achieved man's first powered flight in 1903, aircraft had sufficiently "come of age" to play an important role in the First World War. In the third in the regular series examining his "Hero of the Month", Lord Ashcroft reveals the remarkable actions of Second Lieutenant (promoted posthumously to Lieutenant) William Rhodes-Moorhouse.



Jon Enoch/eyevine

The early military flyers clambered into their slow and cumbersome aircraft with only the most primitive weapons and, extraordinary as it may seem, the first dog-fights were undertaken with pistols and carbines and most small bombs were actually dropped from the cockpit by hand.

The life-expectancy of these early pilots was short and ample amounts of courage were needed even to climb into an aircraft, let alone to perform the acts of dramatic gallantry that were repeatedly displayed from 1914 to 1918. William Barnard Rhodes-Moorhouse was the very first airman to be awarded the Victoria Cross and few stories that lie behind Britain's most prestigious gallantry medal can have been more moving. For, as we will see, Rhodes-Moorhouse left behind a moving and prophetic "first and final letter" to his baby son.

Rhodes-Moorhouse was born in London on 26 September 1887. His family were great adventurers: indeed his grandfather, William Barnard Rhodes, became one of the first Englishmen to arrive in New Zealand in July 1836, having left his native Yorkshire. Rhodes, who was helped by his three brothers, amassed a fortune from farming and other business interests. This £750,000 – an enormous sum of money at the time



TOP: The medals awarded to Second Lieutenant (promoted posthumously to Lieutenant) William Rhodes-Moorhouse VC. © IWM; Courtesy of the Lord Ashcroft Collection)

ABOVE: Second Lieutenant William Rhodes-Moorhouse. © IWM; Courtesy of the Lord Ashcroft Collection)

Lord Ashcroft's "Hero of the Month"



combustion engine. After school, he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, but there neglected his studies for his love of engineering and his passion for racing motorcycles and cars. By the time he was in his early twenties, Rhodes-Moorhouse was fascinated with the new sport of flying. He paid for flying lessons and became a pioneer airman, attracting large crowds when he flew from Huntingdon airfield, Cambridgeshire, at a time when a man in flight was still a sensational spectacle.

– was eventually inherited by his half-Maori, adopted daughter, Mary Ann, after he died. She married a New Zealander, Edward Moorhouse, with whom she had four children, and their family was raised in England.

Will, the couple's eldest son and a robust boy with fair hair and green eyes, was educated at Harrow, where he developed a taste for speed and an interest in the workings of the internal



James Radley, he even produced a variation of the Blériot XI aircraft – the Radley-Moorhouse monoplane. Rhodes-Moorhouse travelled to the USA in 1911, where he piloted a 50-horsepower Gnome-engined Blériot to victory in numerous air-speed contests, thereby earning thousands of dollars in prize money. He continued to fly competitively on his return to Britain, ending his peacetime flying career with a record-breaking, cross-Channel flight in 1912, which took place shortly after he married his wife, Linda, a school friend of his sister.

When war was declared, he volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) even though he had not flown for two and a half years. With a shortage of experienced pilots on the Western Front, Rhodes-Moorhouse was soon posted to 2 Squadron at Merville, France, on 21 March 1915. His squadron flew the Farnborough-designed Blériot-Experimental (BE) 2a and 2b, which were sturdy aircraft but had a maximum speed of just 70mph at ground level.

Rhodes-Moorhouse began with some



ABOVE LEFT: William Rhodes-Moorhouse, Royal Flying Corps: the first airman to be awarded the Victoria Cross. (Courtesy of Steve Snelling)

ABOVE: A contemporary, highly stylised illustration depicting Second Lieutenant William Rhodes-Moorhouse during his attack on the town of Courtrai, 26 April 1915. (HMP)

LEFT: The pencil that Rhodes-Moorhouse carried and which he used to write in his RFC log book. (© IWM; Courtesy of the Lord Ashcroft Collection)

BELOW: Pioneering days – Rhodes-Moorhouse's Radley-Moorhouse monoplane in 1911 during one of his trailblazing pre-war flights. Rhodes-Moorhouse is believed to be the figure standing on the left on the group standing by the plane, wearing a trilby. (Courtesy of Steve Snelling)

familiarisation sorties, but soon had his baptism of German anti-aircraft fire at 7,500 feet over Lille. His pilot's log book recorded that the top centre section of his aircraft was hit by a shell on 29 March 1915. Four days later he wrote to his wife, describing the sound of anti-aircraft fire as "first a whistle, then a noise like a terrific cough".

Poor weather meant he had few



flights in the first two weeks of April, but from the 16th of the month he was performing numerous highly-dangerous missions. During one ninety-five-minute reconnaissance, his aircraft's wings and bracing wire were hit by shrapnel. His service did not go unnoticed by his superiors and he was recommended for promotion to substantive lieutenant.

The Germans inflicted their first gas attack on Allied troops on 22 April 1915, and for the next four days they took the initiative in battles in and around St Julien and Ypres. On 26 April, the RFC was ordered to bomb the enemy's railway network to prevent reinforcements reaching the front lines. Rhodes-Moorhouse, who had been due some much-deserved leave, was instructed to bomb the strategically-vital railway junction at Courtrai – one of three targets for four aircraft.

He took off alone from Merville at 15.05 hours, having been asked to release his 100lb bomb from just below cloud level. However, after making the thirty-two-mile flight, he dropped right

down to 300 feet to ensure a direct hit. He was greeted instantly with a volley of rifle and machine-gun fire, and when he was directly over the target a burst of machine-gun fire perforated his aircraft's fuselage and smashed into his thigh. At the same time, fragments from his own bomb ripped through the wings and tailplane.

Rhodes-Moorhouse, badly wounded and in great pain, had two options: land behind enemy lines, receive urgent medical attention and become a Prisoner of War; or try to limp back to base with his aircraft and the valuable intelligence he had gathered. Choosing the latter option, he dropped a further 200 feet to gain some extra speed and again encountered heavy fire from the ground. This led to two new wounds to his hand and abdomen.

Despite everything, he somehow managed to steer his aircraft home, crossing the Allied lines over some Indian troops who looked up in awe and later asked for details of his courageous sortie to be translated into Hindustani. Just

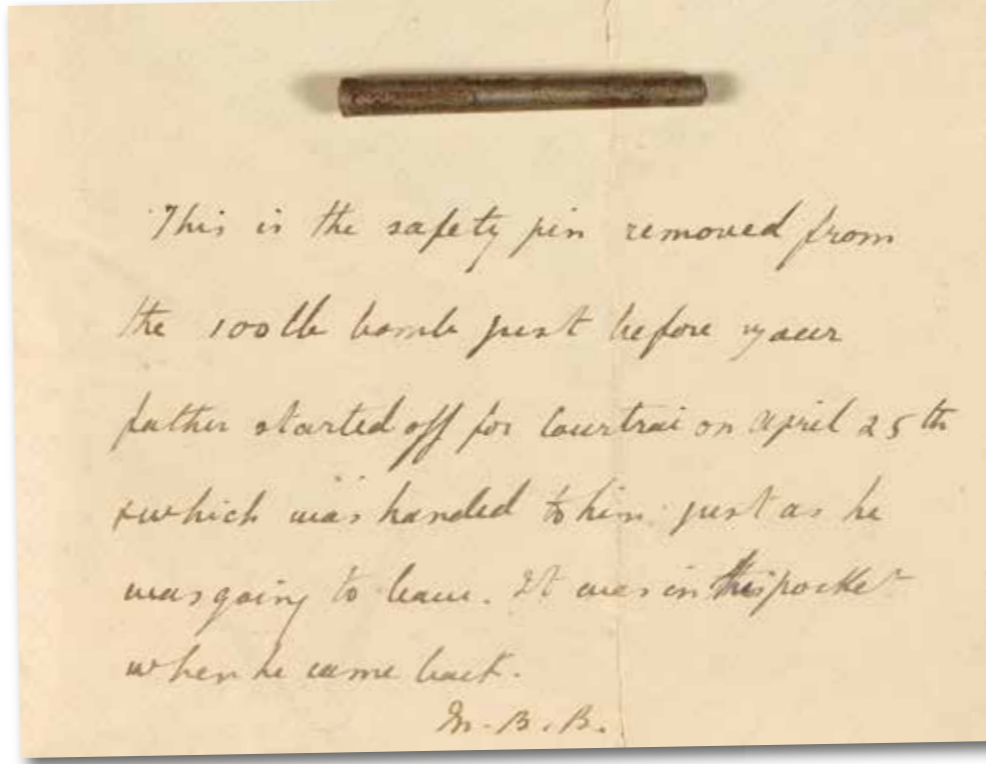
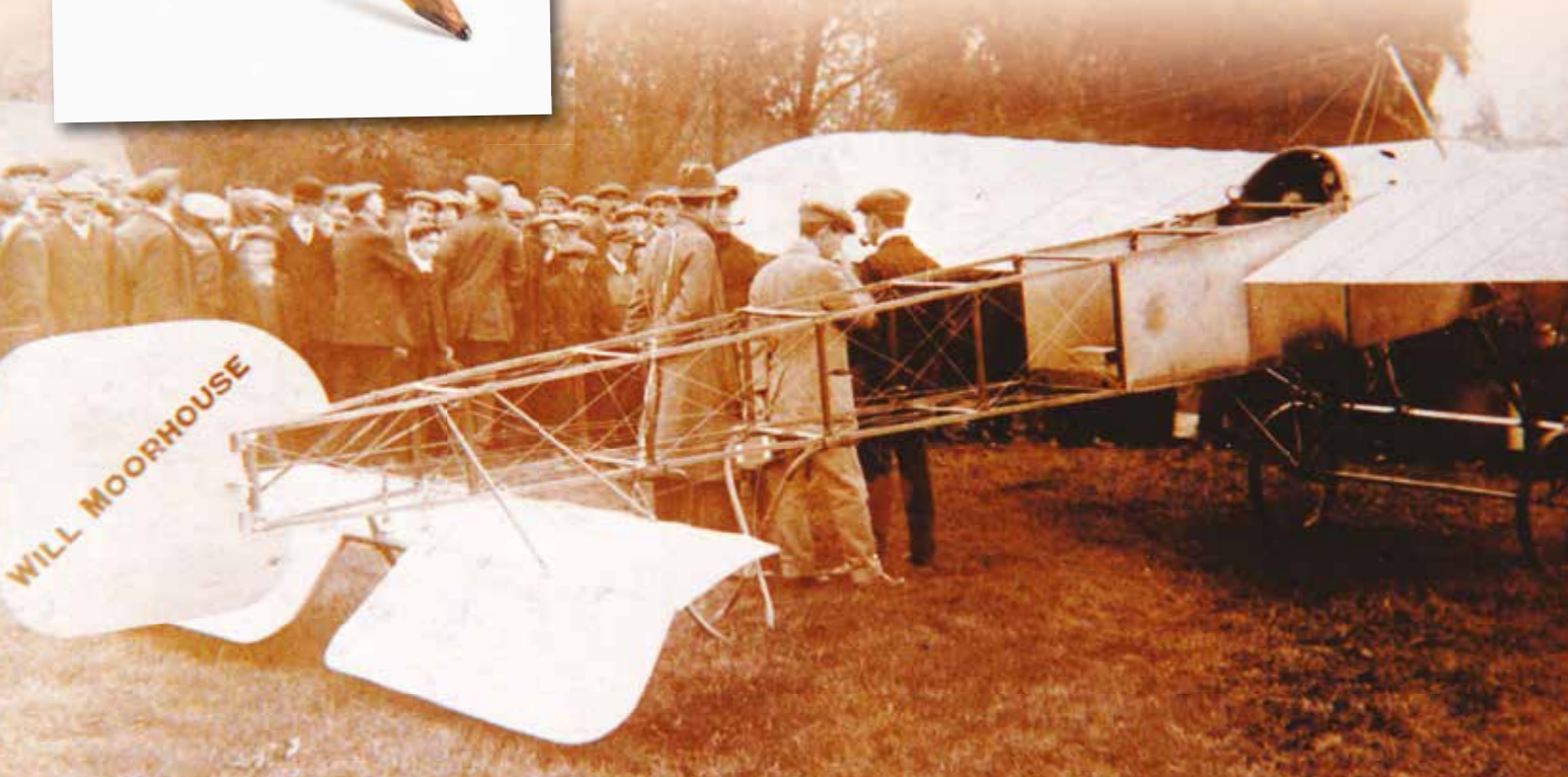
three days later, the daily bulletin to the troops stated that Rhodes-Moorhouse's mission had been a total success and "would appear worthy to be ranked among the most heroic stories of the world's history".

At 16.12 hours eyewitnesses saw

ABOVE: An example of a Royal Aircraft Factory BE2a, an aircraft similar to that flown by Second Lieutenant William Rhodes-Moorhouse on 26 April 1915. According to the original caption, this image was taken early in 1915 before the RFC adopted the roundel markings later that year. (US Library of Congress)

BELOW LEFT: The pin of the bomb dropped by Rhodes-Moorhouse during the mission for which he was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross. The hand-written note, initialled by Maurice Blake, states: "This is the safety pin removed from the 100lb bomb just before your father started off for Courtrai on April 25th which was handed to him just as he was going to leave. It was in his pocket when he came back." (© IWM; Courtesy of the Lord Ashcroft Collection)

BELOW RIGHT: Rhodes-Moorhouse's gallant mission was featured as the cover story of *The Victor* comic in 1964.





ABOVE: A portrait of Rhodes-Moorhouse's son, William Henry, or "Willie", who was killed, having taken off in his 601 Squadron Hurricane (Mk.I P8188), during a combat over Tunbridge Wells on 6 September 1940. (Courtesy of Andy Saunders)

ABOVE RIGHT: This commemorative stone is part of a series of panels near the church in Beaminster, Dorset, which carries the name of all those from the village who served in the First World War. The panels, four in number, form part of the churchyard wall itself and are of the local Ham stone. The War Memorial, listing those who gave their lives, is located inside the church itself. (Courtesy of Pol Conway)

BELOW: The Death Penny sent to Rhodes-Moorhouse's next-of-kin. © IWM; Courtesy of the Lord Ashcroft Collection)

him that he had been recommended for the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). At 14.25 hours on 27 April, with a recently delivered letter from his wife resting on his pillow and his friend Blake at his side, Rhodes-Moorhouse died. He was twenty-seven. Back in

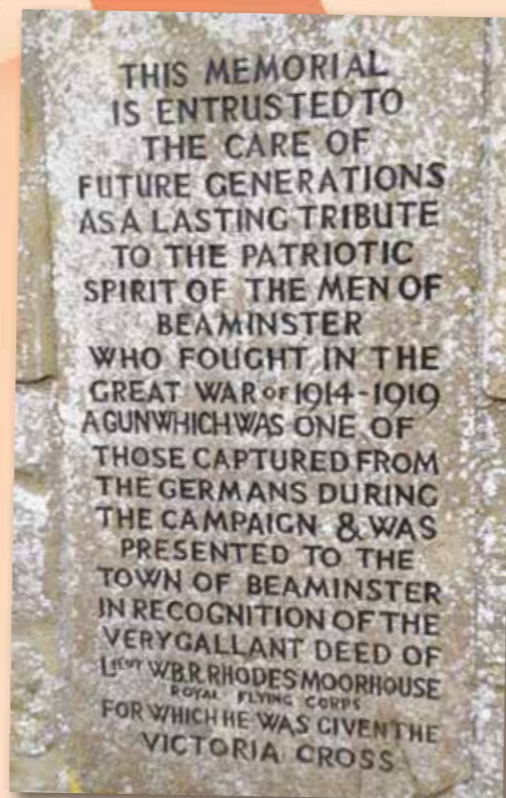
Britain, he was instantly acclaimed as a hero. The *Daily Mail* noted: "Such endurance is enough to make all of us ashamed of ever again complaining of any pain whatever. He was one of those who have never 'done their bit' till they have done the impossible."

A squadron observer, Sholto Douglas, later Marshal of the RAF the 1st Baron Douglas of Kirtleside, wrote a letter of condolence to the pilot's widow: "I do hope such courage will be recognised with a DSO although we all think a VC would be none too great a reward for such pluck and endurance."

It was obviously helpful to have such powerful supporters, but it was Blake's lobbying that secured the VC, and very swiftly: Rhodes-Moorhouse's award, for "most conspicuous bravery", was announced on 22 May 1915, less than a month after his death. At the time, General Sir John French, the British commander, said the pilot had been responsible for "the most important bomb dropped during the war so far".

Before his mission, Rhodes-Moorhouse had written several letters to his family, to be sent to them in the event of his death. One particularly touching one was to his four-month-old son Willie, in which he expressed his love and affection for his wife, with whom he stressed he had never had a "misunderstanding or quarrel".

He urged his son always to seek the advice of his mother and hoped he would be an engineer and obtain "a useful knowledge of machinery in all forms". He also urged him to "keep up your position as a landowner and a gentleman" (the family had acquired the 16th-century Parnham House and its estate near Beaminster, Dorset, before the war). Then, with an



affectionate farewell, William Rhodes-Moorhouse signed what he described as his "first and last letter" to his son. There was a poignant and astute postscript: "I am off on a trip from which I don't expect to return but which I hope will shorten the War a bit. I shall probably be blown up by my own bomb or if not killed by rifle fire." Unusually for the times, but at his own request, Rhodes-Moorhouse's body was returned to Britain where he was given a funeral with full military honours.

The footnote to this tragic story is that Rhodes-Moorhouse's son went on to become a Battle of Britain pilot and actually served, from May 1940, at Merville, France, where his father had been killed in action twenty-five years earlier. After claiming twelve combat victories and being awarded the DFC, Willie Rhodes-Moorhouse's Hurricane was shot down in a dog-fight over Kent on 6 September 1940. The body of the young officer, who died aged twenty-five, was recovered and his ashes were later interred beside his father's at the family's Parnham estate.

I purchased William Rhodes-Moorhouse's gallantry and service medals at a Sotheby's auction in 1990. I feel hugely privileged to have the decorations of this courageous flyer as part of my 179-strong collection of VCs. ■

Rhodes-Moorhouse's badly-damaged aircraft approaching at low level. He just cleared a hedge, switched off the engine and made a perfect landing. Two officers lifted him from the battered aircraft, which had ninety-five bullet and shrapnel holes. Rhodes-Moorhouse was taken to a nearby office, where he insisted on filing his report while his wounds were tended.

He was then moved to a casualty clearing station in Merville, where it was discovered that a bullet had ripped his stomach to pieces. He was given painkillers and it soon became apparent that he was dying.

Rhodes-Moorhouse showed his flight commander, Maurice Blake, a photograph of his wife and son, and asked him to write to them and his mother. He said that if he was awarded a Military Cross, it should go to his wife. After a short doze, he revealed: "It's strange dying, Blake, old boy – unlike anything one has ever done before, like one's first solo flight."

Just after 13.00 hours, he received Holy Communion and a note arrived informing



HEROES OF THE SKIES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story behind the Rhodes-Moorhouse VC appears in his book *Heroes of the Skies*. For more information visit: www.heroesoftheskies.com The Rhodes-Moorhouse VC, along with the remainder of Lord Ashcroft's VC collection, is on public display at the Imperial War Museum (though the museum is closed for refurbishment work until July 2013). For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes

