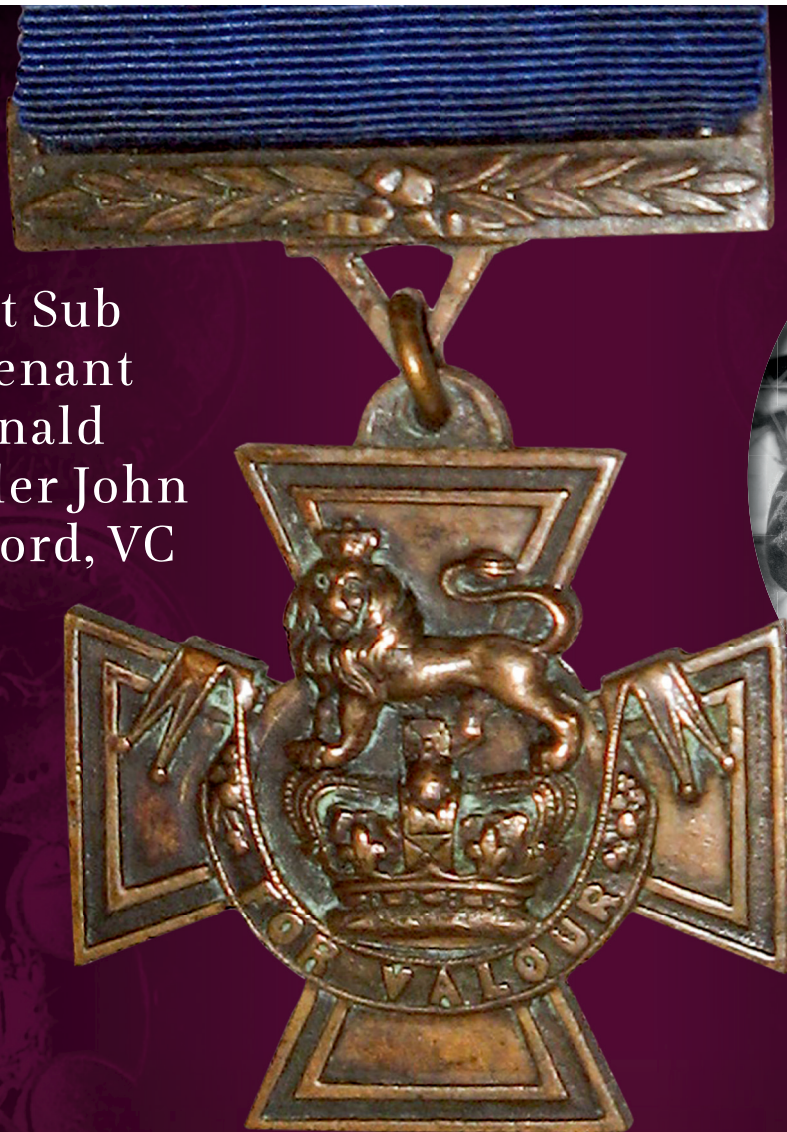


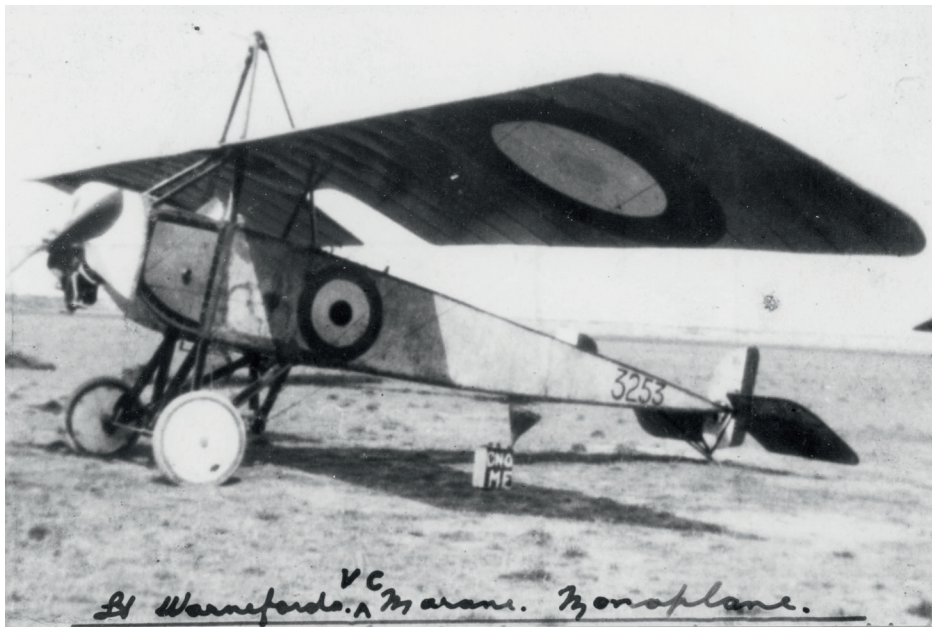
Flight Sub  
Lieutenant  
Reginald  
Alexander John  
Warneford, VC



Flight Sub Lieutenant  
Reginald Warneford VC  
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# HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft



Morane Type L 3253, 1 Squadron, RNAS, at St Pol circa June 7, 1915. This was the aircraft flown by Warneford when he destroyed LZ 37 201 SQUADRON RECORDS

Flight Sub Lieutenant Rex Warneford was the first recipient of the Victoria Cross to learn of his decoration in a telegram from the ruling monarch. Indeed, the pilot's heartfelt message from King George V came within just 36 hours of his VC action in which he became one of the few British airmen successfully to air-bomb a much-feared Zeppelin airship during World War One.

Reginald Alexander John Warneford was born in Darjeeling, India, on October 15, 1891. He was the only son of five children born to Reginald William Henry Warneford, a consulting engineer to the Cooch Behar State Railway, and his wife Dora (née Campbell). His parents, who had a reputation for arguing with each other, eventually separated and young Reginald – usually known as 'Rex' – was brought up largely in England, under the care of his grandfather, the Reverend Thomas Warneford. Once in England, he attended King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford-upon-Avon. At school, he earned a reputation as an independent boy, variously described as "a character" and "individualistic".

Rex's father died in 1903 when he was just 11 and then his grandfather became so ill that he was unable to carry out his work as a reverend. This resulted in the churchman moving to Ealing, London, where Rex lived for a time too – although this was not a happy period in his young life as his grandfather's health continued to fail.

In January 1905, then aged just 13, he started work with the British India Steam Navigation Company, a subsidiary of P&O. He began an apprenticeship on Somahi, a liner in the company's fleet, and his more specific role was to attend to the needs of the first-class passengers aboard. At the

end of 1905, he suffered another personal blow to what had already been a troubled childhood, when he learnt his much-loved grandfather had died.

Warneford's role in the Merchant Navy lasted eight years, taking him to the age of 21. His final position as a merchant sailor was as the navigating officer on SS *Mina Brea* which, unfortunately for him and the rest of the crew, ran aground off the coast of Chile before eventually returning to Liverpool, her homeport. In 1914, as war loomed, Warneford applied for the fledgling submarine service, via Royal Naval College Dartmouth, but he was turned down.

### Reckless Rex

In January 1915, and by this point 23, Warneford volunteered for the Army, being accepted by one of the newly formed 'pals battalions' the 2nd (Sportsman's) Battalion, The Royal Fusiliers. This battalion was intended for men who were "fit and hard" and, although Warneford had not excelled as a sportsman at school, he held his own among the others.

However, once again, he was not entirely happy with his role and the lack of action and so he applied for – and was granted – a transfer to the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), which was, alongside the Royal Flying Corps, a forerunner to the RAF. Warneford was accepted as a probationary pilot on February 10, 1915, despite having no prior knowledge of flying. Just 15 days later, on February 25, he qualified as a pilot after which he was sent to 2 Squadron, RNAS, at Eastchurch in Kent, where – as at school – he was seen as a bit childish, even rebellious. It was while based at Eastchurch that he crashed one aircraft into another, emerging without any serious injury.

Despite this incident, his flying instructor described him as "a born aviator".

On May 7, 1915, Warneford was transferred to 1 Squadron, based in Dunkirk, France. By this point, he was developing a reputation as a slightly reckless but accomplished flyer and his personal courage was never doubted. After watching one of Warneford's flawless landings, his commanding officer, Wing Commander Arthur Longmore – later knighted and promoted to air chief marshal – told him that despite his "unsavoury reputation" he would be judged in France on how he performed.

The very night after receiving this warm reassurance, Warneford blotted his copybook again by driving one of the squadron's tenders into a ditch. This resulted in a "final warning" from Longmore that any further unwelcome incident would result in him being transferred out of 1 Squadron.

Never one to conform, Warneford – sometimes known as "Reckless Rex" – embarked the very next day on his first operational sortie with 1 Squadron, flying a Voisin two-seater multi-purpose biplane with John D'Albiac as his observer. The duo failed to return after two and a half hours, and it was feared their aircraft had been shot down or run out of fuel and had made a forced landing. When they returned to base, D'Albiac recounted how Warneford had pursued an enemy aircraft – at tree-top height and while taking potshots at it with a rifle – the observer demanded never to be sent up with Warneford again, such was his anger over the pilot's perceived recklessness.

### Cat and mouse game

Early in the war, there was great apprehension in Britain, among the military and civilians alike, over the fact that German airships, notably Zeppelins, might prove to be unstoppable. In fact, one of the main tasks of 1 Squadron was to try to prevent Zeppelins from reaching England in the first place.

On May 17, 1915, Flight Sub Lieutenant Warneford, flying a two-seater Nieuport, along with another pilot, Spencer Grey, were taking part in an anti-Zeppelin patrol off the Belgian coast. They encountered Zeppelin LZ 39, which, along with two others, was heading for southeast England. Both pilots approached LZ 39 and opened fire. However, the enemy commander acted quickly to drop the craft's water ballast so that the Zeppelin rose quickly and beyond the ceiling of the two aircraft.

Later that night, 1 Squadron's Flight Lieutenant Arthur Bigsworth attacked LZ 39 more successfully, climbing above the Zeppelin in his Avro 504 and dropping 20lb bombs onto it, severely damaging the airship though it was able to return



Charles Tennant's dramatic impression of LZ 37's destruction, which originally ran in *The War Illustrated*, Vol.2, no.44  
THE WAR ILLUSTRATED ALBUM/  
TRENT UNIVERSITY

to base. It is stated that Bigsworth received the DSO for this attack, but he actually received it for sinking a German U-boat. Before long, he was promoted to squadron commander and in 1917 received the bar to his DSO. In 1922, the airman met author W E Johns when both worked at the Air Ministry, and Arthur Bigsworth is suggested as a source of inspiration for Johns' iconic Biggles character.

Soon after the May 17, 1915, incident, 1 Squadron took possession of a two Morane-Saulnier Type Ls, high-winged monoplanes fitted with racks for bombs. A few dozen of these French machines had been accepted by the RNAS. Warneford was allowed to fly one of these new aircraft and was doing so late on June 6, 1915, when he was tasked with attacking three airships en route to England. Warneford was accompanied by a second pilot also flying a Morane. Each had six 20lb bombs.

*“Warneford was developing a reputation as a slightly reckless but accomplished flyer and his courage was never doubted”*



Warneford's medal group, comprising his blue-ribbon naval VC, 1914/15 Star, War Medal, Victory Medal and Légion d'honneur  
PAUL HERMANS

Shortly after midnight, Warneford – having lost his comrade in thick mist – came across an airship over Ostend. After



Warneford wearing his Légion d'honneur  
HERITAGE IMAGES/TOFPOTO

giving chase, Warneford found himself under fire from top gunners defending LZ 37. He avoided their fire and gained height before a cat-and-mouse game ensued in which the pilot tried to give the impression that the Germans had beaten off his attack. At around 0215hrs, as LZ 37 got ready to land, Warneford launched a surprise attack, climbing quickly to 11,000ft so he was a few thousand feet above the Zeppelin. When he glided down much nearer the enemy airship, he dropped the first bomb, followed soon after by the rest of them.

A huge explosion below followed as the airship was seemingly split in two. The Zeppelin plunged thousands of feet in seconds and crashed into the Convent of St Elisabeth in a suburb of Ghent. One nun was killed and two more badly burnt as the debris hurled to the ground. All seven Germans on board perished too.

Unaware of his successful attack, Warneford had his own problems to deal with. His aircraft stalled, forcing him to land behind enemy lines. For a moment, it seemed as though he was destined to become a POW, but a cursory examination of his aircraft revealed no damage had been done. Closer scrutiny disclosed that the reason he had stalled was that the fuel feed pipe had broken.

Staying calm, he managed to install a cigarette holder in place of the broken feed and to his delight it fitted well. When he turned the ignition,



Mourners and the firing party at Warneford VC's funeral HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

the fuel flowed through the temporary 'pipe' and the engine roared into life. As he took off, a party of Germans emerged from a nearby wood. "Give my regards to the Kaiser!" Warneford supposedly shouted at the troops as he escaped their clutches. He then returned to base and to a hero's welcome for his brave deeds.

### Hailed a hero

As mentioned, Warneford's telegram from the King informing him of his VC arrived within 36 hours. His decoration was officially announced in *The London Gazette* on June 10, 1915, which stated:

"For most conspicuous bravery on the June 7, 1915, when he attacked and, single-handed, destroyed a Zeppelin in mid-air.

"This brilliant achievement was accomplished after chasing the Zeppelin from the coast of Flanders to Ghent, where he succeeded in dropping his bombs on to it from a height of only 100 or 200 feet. One of these bombs caused a terrific explosion which set the airship on fire from end to end, but at the same time overturned his aeroplane and stopped the engine. In spite of this he succeeded in landing safely in hostile country, and after 15 minutes

started his engine and returned to his base without damage."

Sadly, Warneford had precious little time to enjoy his fame. On June 17, while still revelling in the award of his VC and shortly after receiving the Légion d'honneur from France, he was flying an American journalist, Henry Beach Needham, near Paris, and being interviewed at the same time. After Warneford had straightened out after a steep dive, his Henri Farman aircraft spun out of control, throwing the men into a field of wheat.

Onlookers found Needham first, but he was dead. They found Warneford in "a terrible state" face down in the field. A passing civilian car was commandeered to take the pilot to hospital at Versailles, but he died before a doctor could examine him. A post-mortem revealed he had suffered a fractured skull, two broken arms and fractures to his right hip and leg. Warneford was 23 years old and single when he died.

On June 21, his body was returned to England. He was buried with full military honours the next day at Brompton Cemetery, London, when 50,000 people lined the streets as his cortège passed.

Warneford, who was hailed as a national hero, was taken through the streets of London on a gun carriage drawn by Blue Jackets and a 50-strong firing party honoured him with a farewell salute.

His VC – the first in the war to a member of the Royal Navy – was sent to his mother and is on display at the Fleet Air Arm Museum in Yeovilton, Somerset. Up and down the country, three different streets were named or renamed in his honour. **BW**

### HEROES OF THE SKIES



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