

FORGET ME NOT

JOHN THOMAS MCKAY CHRIS WAINWRIGHT'S GREAT UNCLE

Lt. John Thomas McKay was my Great Uncle. He was 18 years old and worked for the Inland Revenue in Northampton in 1917 when he volunteered to join the Infantry. He was quickly transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, 23 Squadron. He died on 3rd July 1918, in the closing months of the Great War, aged only 19 years old.

23 Squadron Royal Flying Corps was formed at Fort Grange, Gosport, in September 1915. The squadron later moved to France in March 1916. By April 1918, the squadron was flying Sopwith Dolphins, a single seater plane. Their role was to be offensive fighter patrols and to provide low level strafing attacks against German troops. Lt John McKay went out on an evening flight over German lines and never returned. He was reported as missing in action, his whereabouts were unknown. Nothing more was heard until October 1938, when a letter written in German arrived at Lt John McKay's parent's house in Blackpool. The letter was from Ludwig Hartman of Frankfurt, Germany, a German infantry officer. Hartman was the first person to reach my Great Uncle after he had been shot down during a dogfight with a German airman.

Here is an extract from the letter received from Ludwig Hartman.

The war demanded victims to the last and your son was one of the last in his brave and proud flying corps. Your dear son fell with his machine after a fight with a German airman. On hitting the ground he was flung out of his plane and was killed instantaneously. I was the first to reach him. The expression on his face was peaceful; there was no trace of wounds. I closed the eyes of this brave foe. The flask, which he had on him, I gave to my regimental staff.

I retained a little photograph intending when an opportunity presented itself to forward it from Germany to his relatives. I sent this last souvenir of him to my dear mother. On October 8th 1918 (exactly twenty years ago). I was myself severely wounded and lay for a long time in hospital in Standal, Altmark, far from home, mother and relatives so the picture has remained at my home all this time.

And then it came about that at the end of the war my native town Wiesbaden was occupied by the French and once an officer had no (an illegible word).

It was not until the death of my mother that I acquired her possessions and amongst them reappeared the little photo. Unfortunately, I could not come to see you myself; time did not permit. But it is quite possible that I may come to England next year.

I would gladly help you find the grave of your son. I know exactly where it was and could immediately find the spot again. The fall occurred near Moreuil on the main road between Amiens and Mondidier.

For me the occurrence remains unforgettable, particularly because it took place on my birthday, the 3rd July.

Your dear son died on 3rd July 1918 at 8.30pm.

Should you ever come to Germany I would be glad to see you at my home.

Ever at your service.

Ludwig Hartman

Shortly after the letter and photograph was received we were once again at war with Germany.

It wasn't until 1992 that I took my family to the village of Moreuil to look for his grave in the British War Cemetery. To our surprise there were two graves marked "Unknown Airman" with one identified as a Lt. in the Royal Flying Corps. We also visited Arras where his name appears on the Royal Flying Corps Memorial. It is my intention to have his grave marked in recognition of the sacrifice he made for others and his country.

