

ERIC ELGEY



19th March 1917

1891-1917 Aged 25



**Second Lieutenant 3/3rd West Riding
Brigade Royal Field Artillery, attached
59th Squadron Royal Flying Corps.**

Eric Elgey was born at the end of 1891 in Shipley, the only child of Alfred Hargreaves Elgey and Jesse Farrell who had married in 1888. Alfred was the adopted son of William Hargreaves, a Bradford wool-sorter. He started work as clerk to a yarn merchant, became a salesman, and then set up his own business in Bradford as a yarn merchant. Eric went to Bradford Grammar School when he reached the age of nine at the end of 1900, winning the form prize at the end of his first year. He took to Latin with facility, and later to Greek, and so he followed the Classical route into the Sixth Form. His interests at school seem to have been photography and debating. He was a confident speaker given his youth, and he won the Debating Society's cup in 1909. He was also a member of the Bradford Rowing Club. In 1910 Eric won an Open Classical Scholarship to Oriel College, Oxford, leaving in 1914 with a 2nd in Literae Humaniores. He then took the Civil Service exam, in which he came fortieth, much to his surprise as he confessed in a letter to his tutor at Oriel, and he secured a clerkship to the Public Record Office. While he waited to take up his appointment he worked for his father, whose clerk had joined up following the outbreak of war in 1914.

When Eric decided to volunteer is not known—it was not in his mind when he wrote to his tutor in October. As a student he had been a private in the Oxford OTC, and probably early in 1915 he joined the London University OTC for further training before receiving a commission in the Royal Field Artillery in December. He was appointed to the 3rd West Riding Brigade's reserve formation, based at Sheffield. Although he signed the obligation to serve overseas, his was a training unit and he served at home throughout 1916. It was perhaps in frustration that he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and he finally went to France in February 1917.

Second Lieutenant Elgey became an observer in 59th Squadron RFC which crossed the Channel to France on 13th February. This squadron was equipped with the RE 8, a two-seater biplane designed for reconnaissance work. Although widely used by the British, this machine suffered from poor manoeuvrability which made it vulnerable to enemy fighters. Moreover, at this time the German fighter squadrons were being re-equipped with the superior Albatros D. III which gave them the advantage in the air. The resulting heavy losses among British pilots led to the month of April 1917 being dubbed 'Bloody April'. Elgey was to be an early victim of the British loss of control of the airspace above the trench-lines.

On the morning of 19th March Elgey was observer to Captain Eldred Wolferstan Bowyer-Bower on a photo-mission to reconnoitre the new German positions near Croisilles, between Arras and Bapaume. Around 09.30 they were attacked by six German planes which had been using the clouds for concealment. The 'kill' was claimed by the German ace Leutnant Verner Voss, a pilot whom Richthofen, the famous 'Red Baron', considered his equal. Elgey's plane was initially reported missing, but it was later found on the ground, riddled with bullets, by its pilot's father who was himself a flyer. The two men's bodies were buried side-by-side in Mory Abbey Military Cemetery (north of Bapaume).



Acknowledgements:

The photo shows Elgey's freshman photo at Oriel College, Oxford, 1910—unfortunately it is not known which one is him (with thanks to the Provost and Fellows of Oriel College, Oxford—I am very grateful to Rob Petre, College Archivist, for sending me this and other items). There is a brief biography of Elgey by Colin Coates on <http://www.shipleyww1.org.uk/People%20Elgey,%20Eric.html> accessed 28-2-2017.

I relied on Ancestry.com to research the family. Elgey's school record came from the BGS Annual Reports 1901-1910. The *Bradfordian*, xiv, no. 103 (March 1909), 15-16, and xiv, no. 104 (April 1909), 25, record his activities; earlier, he performed a song at the Debating Society Readings (*idem*. ix, no. 81, May 1905), 53; *idem*. xix, no. 120 (November 1914) reported his degree and success in the Civil Service exam.

For his war service, his Officer File is in the National Archives, WO374-22330. His death was reported in the *Bradford Weekly Telegraph* 22-6-1917 and there is a brief epitaph in the Bradford Amateur Rowing Club 1914-1918 memorial book (my thanks also go to Barbara Edwards, Hon. Sec. of Bradford Amateur Rowing Club, for locating a copy of the book and allowing me access to it). His commission was announced in the *London Gazette* 15th December 1915 (<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/29403/supplement/12540/data.pdf>)

For the circumstances of his death, see *University of London OTC Roll of War Service 1914-1919* (<http://www.urls.lon.ac.uk/resources/rollofwarservice.pdf>), 18; *Flight Global*, 24th May 1917 (<https://www.flightglobal.com/FlightPDFArchive/1917/1917%20-%200510.PDF>); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_victories_of_Werner_Voss accessed 28-2-2017. For the aircraft, http://www.theaerodrome.com/aircraft/gbritain/raf_re8.php, http://www.wiaviation.com/german1916.html#alb_d3, http://www.militaryfactory.com/aircraft/detail.asp?aircraft_id=201, all accessed 26-2-2017. Also useful was G.D. Sheffield, *The Pictorial History of World War I* (Bison, London, 1987), 184-7.

Elgey was remembered on the memorials at Saltaire Congregational Church, St Peter's, Shipley, and Nab Wood Crematorium (at the last two the name is spelled 'Elgie'). His burial at Mory is Plot I, Row D, Grave 7.

This biography was researched and compiled by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com), February 2017.