

Michael Topham (1895-1917)

Michael Topham was born on 19 May 1895 in Bombay, India, the eldest son of Francis and Pauline Topham. His father was a British civil engineer working in India for the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway. The family returned to England when Michael was 7 and he was educated at Yardley Court School, Tonbridge, from 1902 to 1908. In September 1908 he gained a Foundation Scholarship to Tonbridge School, where he became Captain of Manor House. He became a sergeant in the O.T.C. and especially distinguished himself as a member, and later captain, of the O.T.C. shooting eight. He left school in 1914 after gaining an open scholarship at Downing College, Cambridge, and a Judd scholarship from the school.

On the outbreak of war, Topham immediately enlisted in the 19th Battalion (2nd Public Schools) of the Royal Fusiliers, obtaining the rank of sergeant. In November 1915, he went with his regiment to France and served through the winter of 1915-16, gaining a reputation as an excellent sniper before returning to England in 1916 when it was decided to redistribute the Public Schools Brigade into cadet battalions. Topham joined No. 4 O.C. Battalion, passing out first, and had been accepted into the Rifle Brigade before he volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps. He obtained his wings and was gazetted a Flying Officer on 15 February 1917, and joined his squadron at the Front in March. Over the next month he took part in several bombing and defensive patrols but was reported missing on 13 April 1917 returning from a successful bombing raid. The College magazine, *The Griffin*, later reported that it had been confirmed that he was shot down and instantly killed on that day, aged 21. He was serving with the 27th Squadron and was killed near Rouvroy, near Lens. His Commanding Officer wrote that Topham "was doing extremely well and was a great acquisition to the Squadron, very keen and an excellent pilot. He took part in a previous long distance bomb-raid very successfully and I considered him capable of great things."



Topham is commemorated on the Arras Flying Services Memorial. He has no known grave.

'Bloody April' and the Red Baron

Over 250 R.F.C. men had been lost during the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and, by the following year, many of the remaining aircraft were old or obsolete, many manned by inexperienced replacements for those lost in 1916. On 31 March, the Germans, under the 'Red Baron' Rittmeister Manfred von Richtofen, took delivery of their new Albatros planes, with twin machine guns providing more powerful firepower than any aircraft in the R.F.C. The Germans deployed their new weapon to deadly effect over Arras during 'Bloody April', when the R.F.C. flew over 20,000 sorties to maintain vital reconnaissance but lost 250 aircraft and 400 aircrew.

Image: courtesy of Tonbridge School

Sources:

A. Seldon and D. Walsh, 'Public Schools and the Great War: The Generation Lost' (Pen & Sword Military, 2015), pp8-9.

The Griffin, Michaelmas 1917.

Tonbridge School and the Great War (<http://tonbridgeatwar.daisy.websds.net/>)

'Bloody April' Blog (<http://blog.cwgc.org/bloodyapril>), Commonwealth War Graves Commission.