

# FREDERICK HATHERLEY BRUCE SELOUS, M.C.

**Flight Commander, acting Captain, 60 Sqdn. R.F.C.  
Died on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1918 near Menin, Belgium**



After the mist of the previous day, Friday, January 4<sup>th</sup> was cold and clear, an excellent day for flying, but it would have been a sad awakening for Freddie Selous in his Nissen hut at Ste Marie-Capel, near Cassel, on this, the first anniversary of his father's death in the African bush. But as a Flight Commander in the elite 60 Squadron, R.F.C., he would have had to put that to the back of his mind as he prepared for another patrol.

The S.E.5a was a great advance on previous British fighters, with a ceiling of 22,000ft and top speed (in a dive) of 255 m.p.h. What it lacked in manoeuvrability compared with the best German machines, it made up in speed, a great advantage when in a tight corner. With two machine guns, a Lewis on the top wing and a Vickers through the propeller, in the hands of 60 Squadron's Australian ace, Billy Bishop, it would notch up an impressive number of 'kills'.

Freddie climbed into the cockpit of C5334, ran through the usual pre-flight checks; the mechanic swung the prop of the Hispano-Suiza, then the 6 aircraft of his flight taxied out and took off for their patrol over German lines near the Menin Road, 25 miles to the east. Climbing to avoid enemy ground fire, they would have passed high over the shattered remains of Ypres and the grey shell-cratered snake of no-mans-land stretching north and south as far as eye could see, and into hostile airspace. The air is always arctic 3 miles high, but on a January day, with only canvas between you and a 150 m.p.h. hurricane, the biting

cold will seep through any clothing, but duty is duty and a sharp lookout must be kept for enemy below. One was spotted and Freddie dived to attack.

Now, accounts differ. One reports a collision with an enemy aircraft. The Squadron history reports that 'he dived at some enemy machines several thousand feet below, and in the middle of his dive, the speed of which the other members of his patrol estimated at not less than 300 miles per hour, the wings of his S.E.5 came right off.' Either way, with the utterly misguided official policy of no parachutes, Freddie plunged helplessly to his death, aged just 19 years and 9 months.

Three days later, Pirbright postmaster Harry Briant read the dreaded buff telegram to his mother, Gladys, at Heatherside, Fox Corner. She must have written to a newspaper for news, as, just over a week later, a letter from a Miss Mary Grace Thornton was forwarded to her, confirming his death. Here is part of it –

*'A letter from my nephew, Lieut. Edward Thornton, 60<sup>th</sup> Squadron R.F.C., B.E.F. France, dated January 2<sup>nd</sup> but received only on the 10<sup>th</sup> in England says ".....Great tragedy. Selous has been killed, dived his wings off. We are all frightfully upset about it. It was the first anniversary of his father's death." I telephoned my sister-in-law in the country. She says that a second letter spoke of Selous coming down from 15,000 ft, but I didn't gather that my nephew had seen him fall. The squadron seemed to think everything of him".'*

Less than 2<sup>1/2</sup> years before, Freddie had been a schoolboy at Rugby, a fine athlete and Captain of the School Rugby XV. His father's school, he had entered it in 1912 from a nearby preparatory, Bilston Grange, where he had been a boarder for 4 years. In his boyhood, he had probably not seen much of his famous father, who was often away travelling or on safari. When home at Heatherside, there were always comings and goings, including (reputedly) Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt in 1909.

Freddie was as keen to serve in the Great War as his father. At 17<sup>1/2</sup>, in September 1915, he went to Sandhurst straight from school. Passing out in April next year, he was gazetted as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Queens (Royal West Surrey) Regiment and attached to the R.F.C. as a student pilot at Catterick Bridge. Less than a month later, he went solo in a Maurice Farman and was awarded his Royal Aero Club Certificate.

His first posting was to 42 Squadron in May 1916 at Filton, near Bristol, who were flying the B.E.2e, a somewhat outdated 4-year-old design, but a big step up from the alarmingly flimsy MF. Also then at Filton was 19 Squadron, equipped with the B.E.12, essentially a B.E.2 with a single seat and more powerful engine. Freddie transferred in July 1916, shortly before the squadron went to Fienvillers, about 20 miles south-east of Arras. Although no. 19 had been re-designated a fighter squadron, the B.E.12 was ineffective in this role. Its

shortcomings were swiftly realised and in October they started to re-equip with the more formidable French Spad VII. Delivery was slow, however and the squadron continued flying the B.E.s; it was in one of these on September 29<sup>th</sup> that Freddie had a narrow escape on a contact patrol, when some of the main fuselage longerons were shot through. While there, he would have heard the devastating news of his father's death in January 1917.

A month later came a move to 45 Squadron at Ste. Marie-Cappel, a small airfield about 15 miles east of St. Omer, who were flying the 2-seater Sopwith 1<sup>1/2</sup> Strutter, a useful scout earlier in the war, but outclassed since 1915 by the nimbler and faster German Albatros, so Freddie was lucky to survive the eleven weeks he spent with the squadron as Flight Commander, which became known from its casualties as The Suicide Squad.

A welcome break in the strain of combat came when, in May 1917, he was posted as an instructor to D Squadron of the Central Flying School at Upavon. It must have been something of a compassionate posting, for now he would have the chance to travel home to comfort his widowed mother. Whilst there, he was awarded the Military Cross for his qualities as a leader; he also gained the Italian Silver Medal for Military Valour.

By September 1917 he was back in France with 60 Squadron's S.E.5s. They moved a number of times before settling back at familiar Ste. Marie-Capel that winter. A letter home from a new Canadian pilot describes conditions there—

*'I have not had such comfortable permanent quarters since leaving Canada.... One comfort is that we can wear exactly what we like..... Moving picture shows are given every night in the Church Army hut. It hardly seems at all like war.'* *'You ought to see our strength in dogs. The squadron boasts sixteen canines at present. The officer's mess possesses five. Besides these, we have six pigs and twenty-five hens. There is no shortage of eggs'*.

On November 8<sup>th</sup>, Freddie was credited with downing a Rumpler C-type over Klein-Zillebeke and on December 28<sup>th</sup> another near Roulers. A week later he was dead.

This, a fitting epitaph, is from the History of 60 Squadron, by Group-Captain A. J. L. Scott

*'As good a flight commander as we ever had, he was a very great loss to the squadron. Without, perhaps, the brilliance of Ball or Bishop, he, like Caldwell, Summers, Armstrong, Hammersley, Chidlaw-Roberts, Belgrave and Scholte, to name a few only of the best, played always for the squadron and not for his own hand. He took endless pains to enter young pilots to the game, watching them on their first patrols as a good and patient huntsman watches his young hounds.'*

*'The character of Selous ... attained very nearly to the ideal of a gentleman's character'*