

Francis George Wake Marchant

4 March 1897 - 22 October 1916

Killed in action with RFC during WW1 at Amiens, France.

Excerpt from 'Portal of Hungerford' Western Front: Pilot and Flight Commander, page 56:

.....Portal survived, but not all in his Flight were so fortunate. On 22 October his observer saw a companion Morane suddenly go down, and pinpointed the wreckage. Why it had crashed could only be surmised until the machine and the bodies were recovered. The pilot, Francis Marchant, was one of a family who enjoyed a close friendship with the Portals, and to Portal fell the hard task of writing that evening to the father. The letter survives, still treasured in the Marchant family. Three days later he wrote again, this time to Francis Marchant's mother. Since Peter Portal had an unemotional exterior and was regarded by some as a fairly hard man, it is worth reproducing as an indication of the tenderer side of his nature. It is a letter which, in the words of Francis's sister, 'might have been written by a woman'.....

'Since I wrote to Mr Marchant about the death of your son, I have found out a great deal which I would like to tell you. Before I go any further I must tell you that we have recovered your son's body and that of his observer, and that they are to be buried tomorrow, 26th October, at a small village called Heilly on the Somme, not far from here. I know that what I found today will to some extent comfort you in your great sorrow, namely that Francis was instantly killed, while flying, by a shrapnel bullet in the head. His machine fell just inside our lines, and the same evening some Australian troops, with very great gallantry, went out and took him from it. I went out today and brought his body back with me to the village of Heilly.'

'It may be of some comfort to know that his body is not in the very slightest degree disfigured. I wish you could have seen his face. Never in the six months I have known him have I seen him look more happy and peaceful. I have never had a friend I loved more dearly than Francis and I know that this convincing proof that his death was painless and happy means as much to you as it does to me.'

'It is terribly hard for me to know your wishes, but I hope I did right in saying that he should be buried just as he died, in his flying clothes and uniform.

I took the great risk also of cutting a lock of hair from his dear head, and this I enclose in this letter. If I hurt you by sending it please forgive me. I had no-one to consult and merely did what my own people wished to be done.'

'After the funeral tomorrow I will get a stone cross put up so that you can find it after the war is over.'

'With regard to Francis personal belongings, I have collected all these and they will be returned to you in the usual way. A cigarette case which Major Harvey-Kelley gave him I am sending back as I know this is what Francis wished.'

'Sharing in your great sorrow, I know that this letter will be hard for you to read as it is for me to write, but I cannot finish without telling you that of all the friends I have ever made there was never one I loved as dearly as Francis. He was the straightest, cleanest, Kindest and best, and I shall never know another like him.'

'In his work which he adored he was perfectly splendid, and all our lives were brightened and made better by knowing him. I never knew him unhappy and now that I know he died in peace I can only think it was not he who suffered but we who are for the time being separated from him.,

'I can only pray God to comfort us all'.

R.W. Kent Regiment. RFC 3 Squadron.

Personal letter to Elizabeth Silcock (nee Marchant):

In a letter from Phyllis (Francis sister) to Elizabeth she explained the origin of Francis's name:
'My brother was F.G.W.Marchant, the W. was for Wake, my mothers surname, and the G. was after George Marshan, his Godfather and a very great friend of my parents.

Great War Forum Contributions:

'He was flying with 2nd Lt. C.C. Hann 2 Sqdn. on 22.10.16. They were brought down and Hann died that day, Marchant died of wounds on 25.10.16. They were in Morane Saulnier LA, A247.'

'3 Sqdn were based at Lahoussoye at the time of Marchant's death.'

'Following his commission into The 'Queens Own' Royal West Kent Regiment on the 19th October 1915, Second Lieutenant Francis George Wake Marchant was seconded into the Royal Flying Corps the same week. The only son of Frank and Torfrida Marchant of Woodside, Hayes Common, Keston, Kent, Francis was born on the 4th March 1897 in Chelsea and was educated at Eton and Sandhurst.

At 11am on the 22nd October 1916 while he was piloting a Morane-Saulnier Parasol 1, Serial Number A247 with 2nd Lieutenant Cecil Collins Hann as his observer, Francis was attacked by a Fokker Eindecker piloted by Oberleutnant Hans Berr of Jasta 5 over Sully in the Somme. Their machine was brought down and 2nd Lieutenant Hann died of his wounds that day while Francis finally succumbed to his wounds on the 25th October 1916. He is buried next to 2nd Lieutenant Hann at Heilly Cemetery, Mericourt-L'Abbe - He was 19 years old.'

'It's my belief now that 2Lt FGW Marchant died of his wounds on 22 October 1916 - namely not as it is stated in my book The Sky Their Battlefield - that he died three days later of his wounds on the 25th. The DoW date of the 25th emerged, for example, from "Regimental Rolls of Officers who Died in the War" but there is too much other circumstantial and cumulative evidence in some of the remaining sources which lays out a case for the 22nd. I raise this as it is important that if the date in some of the above discussion is coming from TSTB then my current thinking should be stated. Apparently Marchant took a "shrapnel bullet" wound to the head (via RFC Casualties and Honours During the War 1914 - 1917), and I can only imagine with such a catastrophic wound that his end was soon upon him. One can also imagine that probably a crash ensued.

This crew were listed as Missing in Action and then reported Missing, Died of their Wounds - namely that events happened east of the Lines. In fact the somewhat obscured record of events on the 22nd, as was so often the case for missing crew, is born out and compounded by the fact that there was not a Casualty Report, as such, completed for their loss, but rather it appeared only in the Alphabetical Listings of Casualties in the AIR1 files at Kew.

I am also quite happy that the machine involved was indeed A247 (I wasn't sure in 1995 as no aircraft was listed in the Alphabetical Lists) - a Morane Parasol 110hp aircraft with this serial went missing from 3 Sqn on 22 Oct 1916 with 65 hours on the clock. (Contributor Trevor Henshaw)

'I found it interesting to note that the date Francis was reported as Killed-in-action appeared in the 'Personals' page of 'Flight' magazine dated November 2 1916. There was a further entry in 'Flight' the following week under 'Roll of Honour' reporting that Francis was 'Previously reported missing, now reported Died of Wounds' but with no date shown.

On balance I agree with Trevor, that given all the circumstances the most likely outcome was that Francis and Cecil died together following the attack by Oberleutnant Berr. (Contributor Peter Ziemiński)

Letter and Information from Farnborough Air Sciences Trust:

Thank you for your enquiry regarding Francis George Wake Marchant and his time at Farnborough during WW1.

I have to say that we do not hold any individual records regarding flight training at the military flight school south Farnborough outside that which was reported in monthly Flight and Aeroplane newspapers of the time of which we have a full set of.

However I have found from other sources the following detail relating to this airman which may be of interest to you.

- Francis George Wake Marchant, born 4th March 1897
- Attended Royal Military College Sandhurst
- Commissioned as a 2nd Lt with the Royal West Kent Regiment 19th October 1915
- Attached to the Royal Flying Corps and Attended the Military School at South Farnborough 20th October 1915
- Gained his pilot certificate No 2078 22nd November 1915 flying a Maurice Farman biplane at Farnborough
- Posted 1 Reserve Sqn south Farnborough 6th January 1916 flying officer 24th January 1916
- Joined Expeditionary Forces at St Omer 2nd Air Depot 30th March 1916
- Attached to 3 Sqn 30th April 1916

At 10 am on the 22nd October 1916 while piloting a Morane- Saulnier Parasol V, Serial Number A247 with 2nd Lieutenant Cecil Collins Hann as his observer, Francis was attacked by a Fokker Eindecker piloted by Oberleutnant Hans Berr of Jasta 5 over Saily-Saillisel in the Somme. Their machine was brought down and 2nd Lieutenant Hann died of his wounds that day while Francis finally succumbed to his wounds on the 25th October 1916.

He is buried next to 2nd Lieutenant Han at Heilly Station Cemetery, Mericourt-L'Abbe - He was 19 years old.

His death was recorded in Flight Magazine as follows:

Second Lieutenant FRANCIS GEORGE WAKE MARCHANT, R, West Kent Regiment and R.F.C., killed on October 22nd, aged 19, was the only son of Mr and Mrs Frank Marchant of Woodside, Hayes Common, Kent. He was educated at Eton and Sandhurst and received his commission in the R. West Kent Regiment on October 19th, 1915, but joined the Royal Fling Corps the same week.

He went overseas on March 30th last.