



Harry George Hawker (1889–1921)

Harry George Hawker was a photographic pilot for Aerofilms Ltd who flew sorties for the company during the years 1919 to 1920.

“Harry – the cheery little Australian who grinned a lot and flew like the devil”
(Terry Gwynn-Jones, 1984:119).

Harry was born on the 22nd January 1889 in Melbourne Australia. His parents were George and Mary Ann Hawker. Harry attended school in Australia until the age of 12 at which point he became a trainee mechanic at the Hall & Warden bicycle depot in Melbourne in 1901. After four years of training at Hall & Warden he joined the Tarrant Motor and Engineering Co in 1905 as a qualified mechanic. During the following years Harry proved himself as a skilled mechanic and an entrepreneur, setting up his own car servicing workshop in 1907 (Sheehy, 1983).

In 1911 Harry moved to England and, only a year after arriving, secured a job with the Sopwith Aviation Company as a mechanic (Gwynn-Jones, 1984:119). Soon after starting his job Harry began flying lessons under the tuition of Thomas Sopwith, the founder of the company and Harry’s new employer. It didn’t take long before Harry’s potential as a top class pilot was recognised especially when he flew solo after only four training lessons. Harry received his Royal Aero Club Aviators’ Certificate (no. 297) on the 17th September 1912 (Great Britain, Royal Aero Club Aviators’ Certificates, 1910-1950). After gaining his certificate Harry tutored new recruits at the Sopwith School including Major H. M. Trenchard. During late 1912 Harry was made the test pilot for the Sopwith Company and was also allowed to input his ideas for designs for the biplanes.

The design of the Sopwith Tabloid, and its successors, can be attributed to Harry's ideas (Sheehy, 1983).

Harry had many successes in his career. On the 24th October 1912 he flew for eight hours and 23 minutes in the British Empire Michelin Cup creating a new British duration record for uninterrupted flight. On 31st May 1913 he set a new British height record for a solo flight at 11,450 ft and then in June he set another height record, this time with a passenger at 12,900 ft (Air Racing History, 2012). In August 1913 Harry entered the Daily Mail's circuit of Britain, flying a Sopwith seaplane to try and win the prize. Unfortunately near the end of the circuit the plane Harry was flying crashed in to the sea. Not to be put off Harry entered in the circuit of Britain the following year in July but the race was cancelled due to the outbreak of the First World War (*Flight*, 1921:494).

During the First World War Harry was withheld from active service due to a back injury he had picked up earlier in his flying career. During the years from 1914 to 1918 Harry dedicated his time to testing new Sopwith Machines and providing advice on manufacturing and modifications to the planes being used in the war such as the Sopwith Camel (Sheehy, 1983).

On the 14th November 1917 Harry married Muriel Alice Peaty at St Peter's Church, Ealing (London England Marriages and Banns 1754-1921).

After the war Harry hit the headlines again as he attempted to cross the Atlantic from Newfoundland to England. Harry and Commander Kenneth MacKenzie-Grieve set off on the 18th May 1919 and made good progress but a storm developed knocking the pair off course forcing Harry to ditch the aircraft in to the Atlantic. The men were posted 'missing, presumed dead' and a message of condolence was sent to Harry's wife by King George V. However, unbeknownst

to everyone the duo had been rescued by a Danish steamer which did not carry wireless and so it was with some delay that it was learnt that Harry was still alive. When they returned they were presented with the first ever Air Force Crosses and the Daily Mail awarded Harry £5,000 for being the first pilot to fly over 1,000 miles of water without touching down (Air Racing History, 2012). Not put off by his recent escapade in the Atlantic Harry was in the air again only a few weeks later for 'Harry Hawker Day' organised by Claude Grahame-White, one of the founders of Aerofilms Ltd. The event took place at Hendon and was photographed by Aerofilms Ltd and it is perhaps here that Harry first became aware of the company. The highlight of the event was a public auction to be able to fly with Harry and the first 'flight with Hawker' was won by a Miss Daisy King for a princely sum of 60 guineas (*Flight*, 1919:728-9).

During 1919 Harry was supplied by Geoffrey De Havilland as a pilot to Aerofilms Ltd. However, his contribution to the company was brief as he only flew sorties until the early - 1920s (Hunting, 1991:139). During November of the same year he created his own engineering company – the H.G. Hawker Engineering Co, took part in several motor racing events and put a lot of effort in to trying to revive the, recently folded, Sopwith Company. In 1921 Harry turned his attention to trying to win the Aerial Derby at Hendon. However, only a few days before the Derby was due to take place he was involved in a fatal flying accident.

“Harry Hawker died as he had lived, doing the work he loved” (*Flight*, 1921:494). Harry died on the 12th July 1921, at the age of 32, leaving behind his wife and two daughters. Harry was trialling a Nieuport Goshawk at Hendon Aerodrome when it is thought he lost control of the aircraft through a sudden paralysis from the waist down, caused by an injury to his lower back earlier in his flying career. After the inquest a verdict of 'Death by Misadventure' was returned (*Flight*, 1921:494).

Sources

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