

Horace Cleaver

1899 - 1918

Born and lived in Oxford

Solicitor's clerk

Died in pilot training at East Retford, Nottinghamshire, aged 18, on 17 March 1918

Family

Horace Gregory Cleaver was born in Oxford between April and June 1899, the son of William and Lilian Cleaver. By the 1911 census he was surrounded by six brothers and three sisters at the family home of 6 Farndon Road, Oxford. He was recorded as being at school, and his father was a commercial traveller in grocery and boot retail. At some point Horace became a solicitor's clerk.

War Service: 29th (Reserve) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (City of London) Regiment; Royal Flying Corps

At the start of the war Horace was too young to enlist. But on 25 February 1916 when he was still only 16 he joined the 29th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, which was a reserve (training) battalion. He claimed he was 19, the age at which he could legally go overseas to fight. This surely looked questionable, as his height was 5 feet 6 inches, and chest size 32 inches "when fully expanded". He became a Private, but his lie was discovered and on 18 August he was released, "relegated to AR Class W and will be recalled for service on 16 May 1918". Presumably that was the date of his 19th birthday. "AR" means "armourer", dealing with pistols etc, and "W" means in reserve. He returned to being a solicitor's clerk.

Horace and his siblings were almost certainly keen observers of planes: their home was near Port Meadow which had been an airfield since 1911 and became busier as the war continued and the value of reconnaissance planes was recognised. Flying must have looked tremendously exciting, and this seems to have prompted Horace's next move. He joined the Royal Flying Corps on 6 June 1917, just after his 18th birthday, as a 3rd Class Air Mechanic - a role in which his skill as an armourer could have been useful. He gave his father's name as his next-of-kin, with the address of 11 Warnborough Road - very close to their previous address.

At first Horace trained at South Farnborough, but only three months later on 26 September 1917 he was released from there as a Second Lieutenant, the rank of a trainee pilot or trainee observer. By now he had grown an inch in height and his chest size was 34½ inches. It was noted that he was "keen and efficient". At some point over the next few months he joined the 199 Night Training Squadron, which used B.E.2e biplanes for bomber training.

Horace's family would have been well aware of the dangers of flying, as there had been a number of deaths at Port Meadow. In 1912 people had lined the

streets as hearses took the bodies of two casualties from Wolvercote to Oxford railway station. His parents must have feared for him, and sadly he died on 17 March 1918 in a flying accident at East Retford in Nottinghamshire, aged 18. If he had been less eager to be in action he could still have been at home awaiting his recall to the Royal Fusiliers in May. The family buried him at Wolvercote Cemetery, and perhaps it was some comfort to them that he had realised his dream of flying.

On 1 April 1918 the Royal Flying Corps, which was an army unit, was merged with the air arm of the Royal Navy to create the Royal Air Force.



A restored biplane of the kind flown by Horace Cleaver

This is the story of one of the men who appear on a war memorial at Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Oxford, UK. These stories were compiled in 2018-19 from a variety of family history and military sources. In particular, Chris Baker's site, 'The Long, Long Trail' has provided valuable details of the men's experience of battle:

<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/>

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