

Minchinhampton Aerodrome in 1918 and Curzon Felix Hamel

*Lieut. C.F. Hamel
No. 6 Squadron
Australian Flying Corps
Minchinhampton
Gloucestershire*

Dear Father and Mother,

I have flown a Pup, got my commission and graduated. I feel happy about it but I have got another rather bad return of malaria and am in bed absolutely out of it – no strength at all – its rotten luck just when I wanted to feel good.

My instructor took me up for a few landings in an Avro and then sent me on a Pup. I went to sleep for a minuet (Sic.) or so while up with him. He said I did not look too well but I made up my mind to do it [or] kill myself. I could hardly see but I took her up and brought her down safely, not a wire broken.

At 4.30 this morning I went down to fly it again but just had to get pulled out again before I got a start.

It's wonderful I did not crash, for you ask Etienne how difficult a Sopwith Pup is to fly and I have graduated before men who were here three months before me.

Will write when I feel better,

Love Curzon

Although not dated this recently-discovered letter must have been written between February 1918 and January 1919 when the Australian Flying Corps occupied the newly-constructed Minchinhampton Aerodrome; the reference to an early-morning start would suggest it was during the summer months.

Towards the end of the Great War the Australian Air Corps was set up and from 1917 detachments came to England from the Western Front. In January 1918 the 1st Training Wing of A.F.C. was created with No 1 Station (No 5 and 6 Squadrons) at Minchinhampton and No 2 Station (No 7 and 8 Squadrons) at Leighterton. Cadets at Minchinhampton had already had 6 weeks basic training in aeronautics, code, artillery etc. elsewhere in the country. They then had 12 quarter-hour dual flights, then four hours solo before going on to advanced training for single-seaters at Minchinhampton or two-seaters at Leighterton. Training was always a risky business, especially in planes with poor handling capabilities, but Lieut. Hamel was luckier than the other young airmen who are buried in the cemetery at Leighterton.



Two Sopwith Pups and an Avro at Minchinhampton Aerodrome

Curzon Hamel (or de Hamel as the family were sometimes known) was born in Tamworth, Staffordshire in 1897, although his father was an Australian, from Sydney. The family had roots in Britain, however, and appeared to derive a comfortable living as “*manufacturers*” employing workers in Felix Mills, Tamworth. In October 1914 Curzon, then aged just 17, left England for Australia on the P&O ship Commonwealth; he gave his occupation as “*farmer*” so probably had employment waiting. The Great War, however, was not over in the matter of months which had been predicted when he left Europe and the Australian Embarkation Rolls show that he left Sydney on 14th September 1916 on board the troopship “Mashobra”; his role was as a gunner, part of the reinforcement of the 3rd Brigade of the Australian Imperial Force which was now on the Western Front, having moved from Egypt earlier in the year.

The embarkation records, available on line from the Australian War Memorial, are very detailed and show that Curzon joined the army on 26th April 1916 (when he was 20). He had been living in north Queensland, so was that the origin of his malaria referred to in the letter? After leaving Australia he was to be paid at the rate of 5 shillings per day, with an extra 1s. payable on completion of his service. He would undoubtedly have been pleased to have been accepted for the Flying Corps and to be commissioned. The letter refers to Etienne; this was his older brother who, following a spell in the South Staffordshire Regiment, had joined the Royal Flying Corps and also held the rank of Lieutenant. Another brother, Lancel, was too young to fight but after the war joined Curzon in Australia.

Curzon married in London in 1919 and left soon after with Miriam to return to Australia. He was in New South Wales until after World War II, making several voyages back to England, but finally returned to live in London before his death in 1969.

From one short letter, thanks to genealogy internet searches and the on-line records of the Australian War Memorial, it has been possible to build up a detailed picture of an airman from Minchinhampton Aerodrome.