

**Sergeant Observer Leslie Alexander Dell**  
**No. 14 (Naval) Squadron. Royal Naval Air Service.**

**No. 214 Squadron. Royal Air Force.**

***Distinguished Flying Medal.***



*Sergeant Leslie Alexander Dell, No. 214 Squadron*

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Les Dell was already a very experienced observer and a trained pilot when he was transferred to No. 14 (Naval) Squadron in late February 1918. He was born in London on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 1894. After school, he trained to be an engineer. According to his '*Certificate of Employment During the War*' dated 31<sup>st</sup> December 1919, he joined the Royal Naval Air Service in December 1914 as an Engineer Driver. In June 1916, he officially became an Observer. It is possible that he was posted to R.N.A.S. Eastchurch in the nine month gap to June 1916. He was an observer for a year and a half before training to be a Pilot.

Dell had flown on 28 Reconnaissance and Fighting patrols and 11 Day Bombing raids when he was a member of No. 3 Wing RNAS. On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1916, Dell took part in the famous

Oberdorf Raid as rear gunner on Sopwith 1 ½ Strutter 9400L flown by Flight Sub . Lieutenant R.F. Redpath. As a member of No. 2 (Naval) Squadron he completed a further 22 photographic and reconnaissance patrols. He had a lucky escape on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1917, when his aircraft was late starting on a raid to Brebach. Unable to catch up the rest of the flight, Dell and Flight Lieutenant Potter went out on a Fighting Patrol. They engaged a group of four enemy aircraft at Chateau Salires, apparently shooting down one of the enemy planes out of control. Dell and Potter's aircraft was damaged in the fighting and they force landed at Siechamps.

Air Mechanic Gunlayer Dell started flying training at the RNAS airfield at Vendome, France, on 15th October 1917. Dell learnt to fly at Vendome and Cranwell. From November 1917 until December 1919, he was officially listed as a pilot. On the 25th February 1918, he arrived to join No.14 Naval Squadron, 5th Wing, flying Handley Page 0/100 heavy bombers at Coudekerque Aerodrome outside Dunkirk.

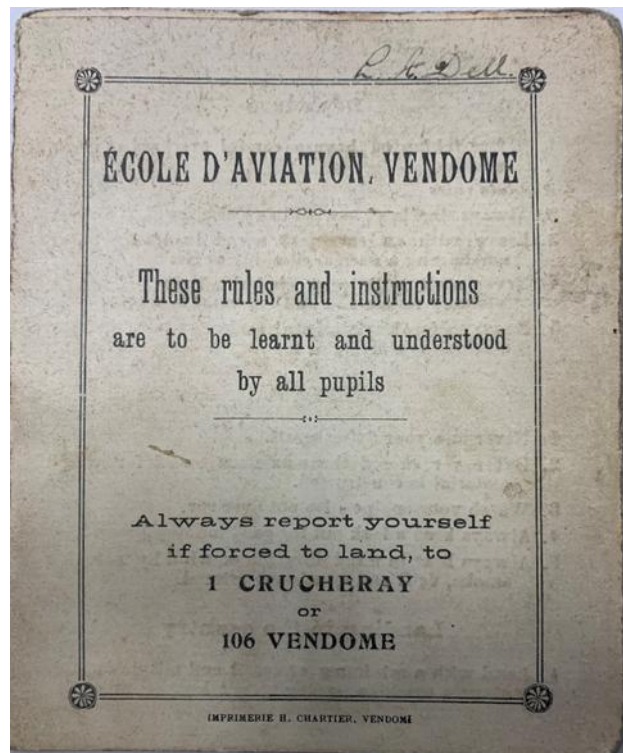
Dell would fly a total of either 33 or 36 missions with the squadron up to Armistice Day in November 1918. Despite being a pilot, and having some training on Handley Pages after arriving at 214, he never piloted the big bomber on Great War missions. However, he became one of the most experienced and respected senior observers with the squadron. His great experience and calm nature meant that he often accompanied brand new pilots on their first mission over the lines. No. 214 Squadron's Commanding Officer, Major Brackley, nominated Sergeant Observer Dell to drop the RAF's first 1650lb bomb in July 1918. According to a handwritten note, in some of Dell's personal papers, at the Royal Flying Corps Collection at Boscombe Down Aviation Collection he was not allowed to fly because of a very rigid social structure in the Navy and the Royal Naval Air Service. *'Rating Pilots not allowed to pilot aircraft with Commissioned Officers on Board'*. The squadron was lucky to lose very few aircraft through accidents and combat losses and often appeared to have a surplus of trained pilots. Dell was probably more useful to the squadron as an observer than as a pilot.

After the war he stayed on with the squadron and started flying aircraft again. He took part in the infamous, Blazing Trials Scandal, in the summer of 1919. He was one of the pilots on the four 214 Squadron aircraft that were sent to Egypt in July at short notice with little logistical support. His aircraft took 23 days to reach Abu-Sueir in Egypt. Les Dell carried the squadron's black cat mascot with him to Egypt. On 31st December 1919, Pilot Observer Sergeant Dell had his last flight and was demobbed from 214 Squadron.

This account does not describe all of Les Dell's 33 or 36 missions on Handley Page bombers. during the War. The missions described here were selected because they stood out for particular reasons. Some missions had appeared in Major Brackley's list of 'noteworthy' missions that were in the January 1919 *'Rough History of 214 Squadron written in the field'*. Others appeared on a list of missions that Les Dell had included in correspondence with Norman Gilham. This list appears to be missions that Sergeant Observer Dell felt were memorable in some way. This list is in the Les Dell papers at the Royal Flying Corps Collection at the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection museum at Old Sarum near Salisbury. Finally some

missions were selected by the author, because of what happened to Dell and his crew on those raids.

15<sup>th</sup> October 1917. Air Mechanic Gunlayer Dell starts his Pilot training at Vendome



Les Dell's flying training commenced at the RNAS training airfield at Vendome, France on 15th October 1917. His first flight was at 11:36 in Caudron 3092 with his instructor, a Lt. Maitland Heriot. It was 19 minutes long and consisted of right hand circuits of the aerodrome at 2,000 feet. It was followed by a further flight of 25 minutes at 15:03.

Date and Hour.	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Instructor	Time in Air	Height	Course	Remarks
15/10/17	11-36 am. N.W. 12.	3092.	Lt. Maitland Heriot.	19 min	2,000 ft	'Vendome', France.	Right hand circuits of Aerodrome commenced instruction
3.03 pm	"	"	"	25 min	2,000 ft	"	under Lt. Maitland Heriot.

By the end of the first week of training he had flown on six consecutive days, with a total time in the air of 3 hours 14 minutes. He had done right hand circuits, left hand circuits, progressing onto landings and 'getting -off'.

October 24<sup>th</sup> 1917. Les Dell goes solo after 6 hours 25 minutes instruction.

On October 24<sup>th</sup> 1917 Leslie Dell has two flights with his instructor in two different Caudrons, the first flight is at 06:30 for 15 minutes then 06:51 for 28 minutes. Lt Maitland Heriot then

puts him into a third aircraft that morning, Caudron 3269 and sends him off on his own. Leslie Dell is going solo. From the log book, it looks like he had had 6 hours 25 minutes of instruction.

At 07:34 on 24/10/ 17 Leslie Dell takes his Caudron on a 9 minute flight up to 1,000 feet. He goes on 'First solo, small circuit of aerodrome. Made good landing'.

Date and Hour.	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Instructor Passenger	Time in Air	Height	Course	Remarks
Oct. 24 <sup>th</sup> 6-30.	N.W.	Caudron 3052.	Mr. Ariels	15 min	800.	Right Hand Circuit.	Practised getting off & Landings.
" 6-51.	"	Caudron 3096.	"	28 min	"	"	"
" 7-34.	N.W. N.E.	Caudron 3269.	Solo.	9	1,000.	Right Hand Circuit.	First solo, small circuit of Aerodrome. Made good landing.
Oct 26 <sup>th</sup> 7-8.	N.W.	Caudron 3251.	"	21 min	1,200	Left hand Circuit.	Solo. Very bumping up to 1,200 ft. Good landing.
" 9-19.	N.W.	Caudron 3269.	"	45 min	2,000 ft	"	Solo. Still bumping. Landed alright.
Total time in Air - 4 hours 40 mins.				W. H. McMinnies			
Total time in Air for week ending Oct 26 <sup>th</sup> 4 hours 26 mins.				27/10/17.			

After going solo, he spends the next few days making longer and longer left and right hand circuits of the aerodrome. On 29<sup>th</sup> October he goes on a cross- country flight to Tours. He takes off at 07:00 for a 35 minute flight to Tours before turning back. Total flight time 68 minutes.

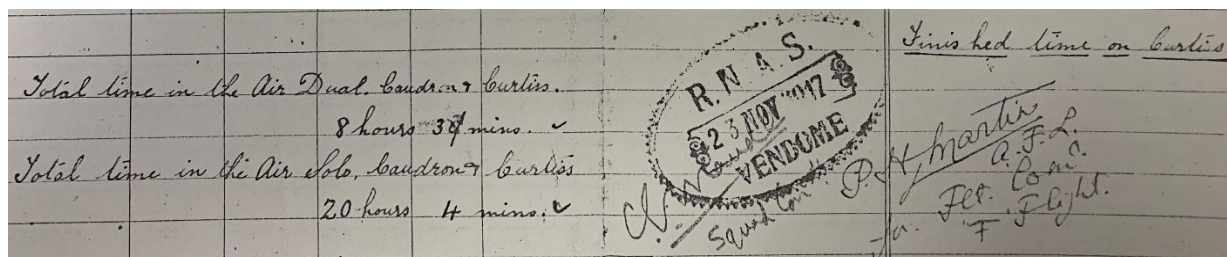
Oct 29 <sup>th</sup> .							Landing
7-0 AM.	N.W.	Caudron		68 min	2,500 ft.	Cross country flight to Tours.	Reached Tours 7-35 AM. Made circuit of French aerodrome, then returned. Made a good landing. Very cold trip.
	No 1	3251.					

That afternoon he is sent off on a longer solo triangular flight that lasts almost two hours from Vendome to Tours to Blois and back to Vendome. Les Dell is becoming more confident and takes the Caudron up to the dizzy height of 6,000 feet. The following day, 30/11/17, he completes another cross-country flight and his instructor is confident that he is rapidly improving. His instructor signs him off as 'Passed out on Caudron's'. He will progress onto the more powerful tractor biplane, the American designed Curtiss Jenny. He has had 6 hours dual instruction and 10 hours solo.

Total time in the Air Dual	6 hours 25 mins.						Good landing.
" " " " Solo	10 hours 14 min						rapid improvement.
Total Time	16 hours 24 mins.						W. H. McMinnies
							27/10/17.
							31/10/17.
							Passed out on Caudron's.
							Start on Curtiss machine tomorrow.



Leslie Dell has his first flight in a Curtiss JN-3 the very next day. A new instructor, Flt. Sub. Lt. Brown takes him up for three short flights in the afternoon. After a total of 2 hours and 5 minutes of dual instruction on the Curtiss, Leslie Dell goes on a solo flight on November 3<sup>rd</sup> at 08:00. It is 20 minutes long and Leslie Dell modestly records a 'fairly good landing' in his log book. Over the next fortnight Leslie Dell continues with his solo flying. On November 20<sup>th</sup> he completes three different flights on Curtiss 8817 each of these flights is roughly an hour long. Leslie's confidence as a pilot has grown with his experience which is inversely proportional to his modesty. All three take-offs and landings today he now describes as 'good'. He notes in his log book on November 20<sup>th</sup> that he has, 'Finished time on Curtiss'.



He has completed his flying training at Vendome. His log book is date stamped on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1917 and signed off by his Flight Commander and the Squadron Commander in charge of the training school. He leaves Vendome with 30 hours flying experience, 20 hours and 4 minutes of which has been solo flying.



*Caption on rear reads, 'Les Dell. Curtiss JN-3. Vendome 1917'*

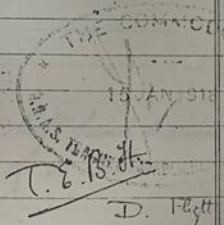


Three days after leaving Vendome, Leslie Dell arrives at Cranwell on 26<sup>th</sup> November, swapping rural France for rural Lincolnshire at the start of winter. His first flight at Cranwell is approximately two weeks later on the 10<sup>th</sup> December, in BE2 A1835. He goes up with instructor Flt. Lt Hinchcliffe for a 30 minute flight to 2,000 feet. Not clear if the aircraft was a B.E. 2c or a B.E. 2e.

The pace of flying training is much slower at Cranwell. There are no more flights for Leslie Dell in the two weeks before Christmas. He is given leave on the 21<sup>st</sup> December, and his instructor has written 'Read your instructions. Line 10'! Clearly some sort of aerial misdemeanour on his

one and only flight so far, has made a mark on Lt Hinchcliffe or the flight commander. He returns from leave on the 29<sup>th</sup> December. His log book states no flying on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1918 because of unfavourable weather.

A month after his last flight, his one and only flight at Cranwell to date, he is back in a plane. The instructing staff appear to be determined to make up for lost time, Leslie Dell will complete six different flights today, January 11<sup>th</sup> 1918. He goes up in a B.E. 2e for further 60 mins of dual instruction to give him a total of 96 minutes dual time since arriving. After only this second flight on a B.E.2, the instructor, Flt Lt Wakefield feels he is ready to go solo.

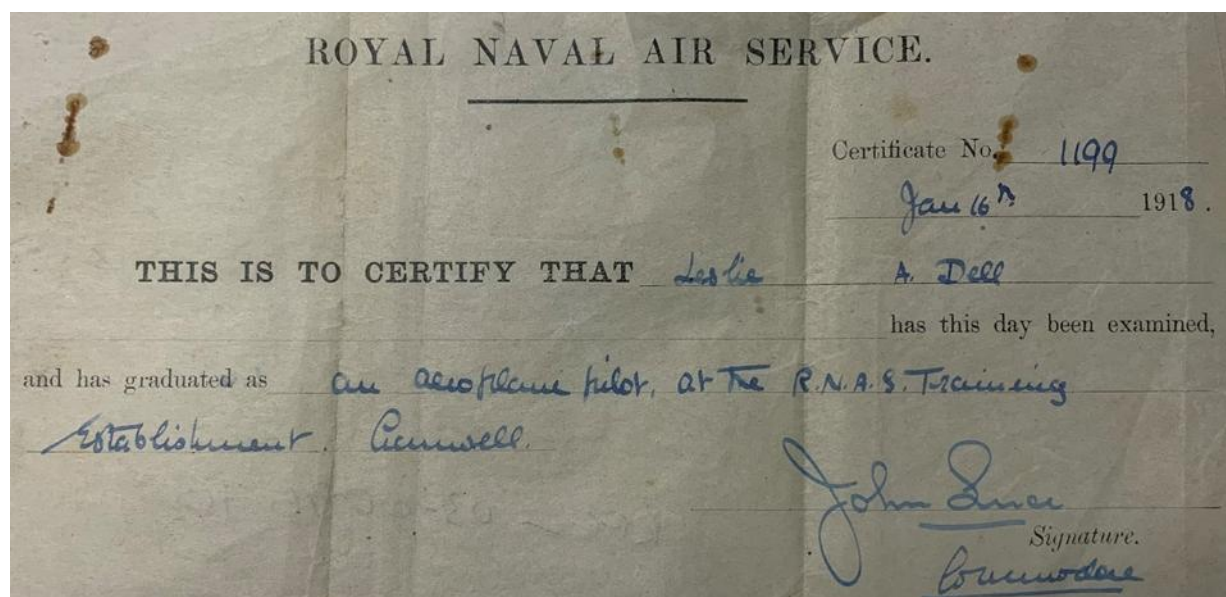
At 10:05 he takes off for a 19 minute solo flight in B.E.2e B3709. Dell notes that the landing was 'fair' and that the aircraft was 'inclined to stall' lack of familiarity. Following this flight he now qualified for his Royal Aero Club certificate. It seems that Leslie was in correspondence with the Royal Aero Club in Piccadilly, at the end of May 1918. His Certificate was back dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> January 1918, when he qualified.

Date and Hour	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Passenger Instructor	Time in Air	Height	Course	Remarks
Jan 11 <sup>th</sup> 1918							
8-51.	N.W.	B3713.	Flt Lt Wakefield.	60	1,000 ft	Right Hand Circuits of Aerodrome.	Practised Landings & taking off.
	No.2	B.E.2E.					
"							
10-5.	N.W.	B3709.	Solo.	19	2,500 ft.	"	landing fair, inclined to stall.
	No.2.	B.E.2E.					
						Qualified for R.A.C. Certificate.	
H-10.	W.	B3718	"	37	3,000 ft.	"	Taking off & landing, good.
	No.2.						
2-9.	W.	B3736	"	10	1,000 ft.	Left Hand Circuits of Aerodrome.	Landed owing to engine trouble.
	No.2.						
2-21.	W.	B3736	"	24	2,000 ft.	"	Very misty, landing good.
	No.2.						
2-57.	W.	B3736	"	38	1,500 ft.	"	Very misty & snowing. Taking off & landing, good.
	No.2.						
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 30%;"> TOTAL TIME IN AIR 10 hrs 45 mins  22 hrs 12 mins  TIME FOR WEEK 60 mins  2 hrs 8 mins SOLO </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Max Alt, 6,000 ft.</p> </div> <div style="text-align: right;">    </div> </div>							

Les Dell has four more solo flights following his first, between eleven o'clock and three o'clock. His third flight, is only 10 minutes long as he lands because the aircraft, Caudron B736, is having some sort of engine trouble. It appears that this was quickly fixed as he was only on the ground for two minutes before taking off again. Perhaps the fuel had not been properly switched on. It is starting to get misty. He takes off for his fifth flight of the day at 2:57 pm and by this time it has started to snow. Despite the weather Les Dell is quickly gaining in confidence and stays up for 38 minutes, 'Very misty and snowing. Taking off and landing, good.'



Dell's log book page for the 11<sup>th</sup> January contains the stamp of the Commodore of the Royal Naval Air Station Cranwell dated 15<sup>th</sup> January 1918. Leslie Dell continues flying the B.E.2e over the next three days making longer and longer cross-country trips. He visits Sleaford, Newark and Lincoln in his travels. His last day of flying at Cranwell is January 14<sup>th</sup>. His log book is signed off and date stamped on the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1918.




Leslie Dell was then posted to Freiston on the Wash on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1918. R.N.A.S. Freiston is where trainee naval pilots go to practice dropping bombs and firing live ammunition. Given his extensive service with No.3 Wing and No.2 (N) Squadron this is probably a bit superfluous. Leslie Dell gets his first Freiston flight on 30<sup>th</sup> January flying as observer in a B.E.2e doing 'mirror -practice'.

His training continues over the next two weeks with various live firing and live bomb dropping. On February 14<sup>th</sup> he has to make an emergency landing after he experiences engine trouble on take-off. He records a 4 minute flight in his log book. The next day he does his last flight at Freiston flying in B.E.2 3703 with Warrant Officer Young as his pilot. It is a short 15 minute flight at 1,500 feet over to the coastal ranges to practice dropping live bombs.

Clearly the mission is a success as his log book has the annotation '*Bombs. 1<sup>st</sup> Class*' written in. The training staff write in his other qualifications from the course. Leslie Dell has scored 77% on his firing machine guns on the range and is graded '*V. G.*', unfortunately his firing in the air is not so good, he only scores 22% and is graded '*Indifferent*'. I am sure that Les Dell had a wry smile at being told that his firing in the air was '*Indifferent*', almost a year to the day since shooting down one of the four German aircraft he had fought over Chateau Salieres.

The great and the good from the Freiston training staff sign Leslie Dell's log book. He has three different signatures. The Squadron Commander, a J. Harrison signs the log book and he gets a Commanding Officer Royal Naval Air Station Freiston stamp dated 15<sup>th</sup> February 1918.

Feb 13 <sup>th</sup> 10-10.	W.	3734.		40m	2,000ft		(W.O. Young as pilot) live bomb practice
Feb 14 <sup>th</sup> 10-145.	E.	3722.		4			Landed owing to engine trouble.
Total Time in Air 6 hrs 39 mins.						Qualifications:-	
Feb 15 <sup>th</sup> 8-55 am	S-E.	BE 3703.	W.O. Young (Pilot.)	15m	1,500 ft		Range VG 77% Firing in Air Indifferent 22% Bombs 1 <sup>st</sup> Class.
Total Time in Air 6 hrs 54 mins.						Lieut. Rowl	
at Freiston.						J. Harrison Squadron Commander	

Leslie Dell is now a fully qualified Royal Naval Air Service pilot. After Freiston he totals up his flying time in pilot training as 43 hours 25 minutes. This is both his solo and dual time combined. On the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1918 he arrives at Coudekerque Aerodrome outside Dunkirk to join No.14 Naval Squadron, 5<sup>th</sup> Wing, flying Handley Page O/100 heavy bombers.

25<sup>th</sup> February 1918. Les Dell is posted to No.14 Naval Squadron, 5<sup>th</sup> Wing at Coudekerque.

Dell's first month with No.14 (Naval) Squadron will be rather uneventful. His arrival coincides with a spell of bad weather and a squadron move from Coudekerque to Alquines. In a less busy sector. Dell takes the opportunity to learn to fly the heavy Handley Page O/400 bombers that the squadron is equipped with. His first flight in a Handley Page was on the 6<sup>th</sup> March



1918 when he was taken up by Lt. V.E. Sieveking for a 30 minute instructional flight. During this first flight, Lt Sieveking let Les Dell take control of the aircraft. In his log book there is the number 15 written in small text. I think that this might be the length of time that Les Dell was in control and flying the Handley Page himself. This first flight was followed by a longer one the next day of 42 minutes with Flt. Sub. Lt. Ould as his instructor. Once again Les took control of the plane and flew it himself, probably for 20 minutes or so.

TOTAL TIME IN AIR 1.3 HOURS 23 MINS.						
ARRIVED AT 14 Sqn. Flying - CAUDEKERQUE 25-2-1918						
MARCH 6 <sup>th</sup> 3-4.5 pm	N.	Handley. Page	30 min	5,500 ft	DUNKIRK.	INSTRUCTIONAL FLIGHT WITH FLT SIEVEKING ON HP TOOK CONTROL IN THE AIR. 15.
" 7 <sup>th</sup> 3-0 pm	E.	H.P.	42 min	3,000 ft	Local	Went up with FSL Ould. Took control in the air 20
	Nº2.	3130.				
MARCH 15 <sup>th</sup>	NE	H.P.	ED VANCE		Via BERQUES 8 St Omer	Went with FSL Veltins to join 14 Squadron at Alpinus
1-30 pm	Nº2.	3134	FSL HAVILLAND- TOL	35 min	2,500 ft	
			FLY YOUNG			
			EDL BOGER			
" 16 <sup>th</sup>	E.	H.P.	3 ARMY			
4-10 pm	Nº2.	3134	OFFICERS.	15 mins	2,000 ft	Local
4-25 pm	E. Nº2.	3134	FLY SIEVEKING AND ARMY OFFICERS	15 mins	2,000 ft	WENT UP WITH FLT SIEVEKING FIRST TIME OF TAKING COMPLETE CONTROL OF HP PRACTICED TAKING OFF & LANDING. 1.

Despite only taking control of a Handley Page bomber for a short time on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of March, Dell is able to reassure Lt. Sieveking of his flying abilities. They have two flights on March 16<sup>th</sup>, in H.P. 3134. The first takes off at 16:10 and lasts 15 minutes. During this first flight Sieveking lets Sgt Dell take complete control of the aircraft and probably lets him land it. He does not crash so they are able to take off again at 16:25 for a further 15 minutes. Dell's log book entry reads, 'Went up with Flt. Lt. Sieveking. First time of taking complete control of HP. Practiced taking off and Landing'. Interestingly on both these two short flights Sieveking and Dell are also flying three army officers. I wonder if the RNAS told their Army colleagues how experienced their pilot was! Over the next week or so Leslie Dell went up on several relatively short flights taking control and practicing take offs and landings. On the 24<sup>th</sup> March he goes up with F.S.L. Ould to practice night flying. He has a 39 minute flight taking off at 21:29 in HP 3134.

26<sup>th</sup> March 1918. Les Dell's first heavy bomber mission with No. 14 (Naval) Squadron. Target Valenciennes Railway Station and Junctions. 'Every endeavour must be made therefore to carry out as heavy an attack as possible.'

Jones, H.A. The War in the Air. Volume 4 of the Official History, 1934, described the planned raid. 'As many Handley Pages as possible will bomb the main railway station at Valenciennes

*tonight. It is of the very greatest importance to interrupt the flow of reinforcements to the main battle front through Valenciennes and every endeavour must be made therefore to carry out as heavy an attack as possible.'*

The target for the mission on the 26<sup>th</sup> March, the important railway junction at Valenciennes, was a long way south from 65<sup>th</sup> Wing's normal area of operations along the Belgium coast around Bruges, Ostende and Zeebrugge. The mission was designed to support the hard-pressed allied forces further south, by cutting off German troop and ammunition supplies to their offensive on the Somme. To do this more effectively, the decision was made to transfer the Dunkerque based squadrons from Naval command to Army control. *'In March Sixty Fifth Wing (Squadrons 206, 207, 211, 214 and 215) were grouped as the VII Brigade and placed under the orders of Sir Douglas Haig.'*

The ten Handley Page bombers from No. 7 Naval and No. 14 Naval Squadrons left Coudekerque a little after 23:00 and attacked their targets from 00:30 onwards. Two aircraft from No.14 Naval bombed Valenciennes Railway Station and sidings. One No. 14 Squadron aircraft attacked railway sidings at Tournai, another bombed a railway junction at Ostricourt on the line between Lens and Lille. The last aircraft from No. 14 Squadron bombed trains on the St Quentin to Le Cateau line. The weather that night started off fine, but became cloudy after midnight.

14 Naval's Squadron's H.P. 3134 was flown by Flight Commander Gibbs. He was flying Les Dell on his first raid with the squadron. *'Raided the Railway Junction at Valenciennes'*. The Observer was Flight Warrant Officer Young. Dell and Lieutenant Vance were gunners on the rear platform. HP 3134 carried 10 x 112lb bombs, Gibbs climbed up to 8,000 feet on his way to the target, before coming down lower for his attack. Dell's log book, *'Bombs were dropped from 5,000 and seemed to explode on the railway and amongst trains. Visibility very good – full moon. Searchlights did not pick us up until on the return journey. Very little A.A. only 2 'Woofs.'* In his second log book, there is a cutting, possibly from an Official Communique or newspaper. *'In addition, four tons of bombs were dropped on Valenciennes railway station through which the enemy's troop trains were passing on their way to the front.'* The flight to Valenciennes and back took 2 hours and 33 minutes.

This raid was so important that it was described in the Official History of the War in the Air Volume 4. *'Five Handley Pages made their attacks about midnight. Three pilots failed to find their objective and bombed instead trains and junctions at Lens, Lille, Ostricourt and Tournai and trains on the St Quentin -Le Cateau railway. Tournai was seen to be particularly congested with railway traffic and twelve 112lb bombs dropped there appeared to do much damage. The seven pilots who reached Valenciennes found the railway junction packed with traffic, and several hits from their four 250lb and seventy six 112lb bombs were claimed on the station and among trains in the sidings.'*

However things did not go smoothly for the attacking bombers that night. The heavy thickening cloud, presented difficult navigation conditions for the pilots and observers, trying to find their way home. One No. 7 Naval bomber landed on a beach near Calais with the crew convinced that they had landed in Holland. One No. 14 Naval crew found their compass jammed. They were lost in thick cloud with no compass. This led to a six hour long flight, unable to fix their location. Eventually the fuel ran out, forcing the crew to land. They had no idea of where they had landed, but there was a strong possibility that they had come down in hostile German-held territory. In fact they had landed just outside the port of Le Harve. Le Harve is 200 miles away from Coudekerque. It would be like landing in Leeds after missing your aerodrome outside London.

April 11<sup>th</sup> 1918. Dell flies his first mission as a Handley Page Observer. Attacking Coastal Batteries in support of attempts by the Navy to block the entrances to Bruges canals at Ostende and Zeebrugge. A frightening experience with a novice pilot.

The war was going very badly for the allies as the German Spring Offensive gained momentum and French and British troops are forced into retreat. The situation had become so desperate by the 11<sup>th</sup> April, that Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander in Chief, issues his famous 'Backs to the Wall' exhortation to the British and Commonwealth troops. However, a daring naval mission had been planned to reverse the Allies misfortunes and reduce shipping losses to the U-boats and destroyers of the Flanders Flotilla.

Ships filled with concrete will be sailed into Zeebrugge and Ostende harbours and sunk in front of the Lock Gates of the Bruges canals. The planners at the Admiralty have calculated that the night of April 11<sup>th</sup> will provide the optimum combination of moon and tides to give the operation the best chance of success. The Handley Page bombers of 214 and 215 Squadrons at Coudekerque will have an important role. The Raid order for the mission has eleven HP O/100s supporting the naval task force and the planned operation.

After the war, Major Brackley gave a lecture to airmen in the Imperial Japanese Navy that described the plan for 214 Squadron's involvement in the operation. Part of the lecture was reproduced in his wife's book about his life '*Brackles Pioneer Aviator*'. *"Our part was to carry out desultory bombing of the coastal batteries of Ostende and Zeebrugge, Ostende Harbour, Zeebrugge Mole and Lock gates with the object of keeping the enemy busy with his searchlights and guns, thus distracting his attention from what was going on at sea. Everything was well organised and kept secret until just before the event."*

*"Each machine was given different objectives to bomb at different times so that a constant supply of bombs was kept up on all objectives for three hours before the Navy arrived. Only one bomb was dropped at a time so as to make them last longer. Detailed objectives and times for dropping were written on a card and given to each pilot. At zero hour all machines*



*congregated over Ostende and Zeebrugge and dropped their parachute flares to assist those on the ground and still further confuse the enemy”.*

The weather conditions remained favourable for the task force until it was 16 miles off Zeebrugge. By 00:30 the wind has dropped and shifts direction. It was now blowing from the south. This would blow the planned smoke screen away from fleet, exposing it to the coastal gun batteries. The ships are less than 90 minutes from the target. Admiral Keyes is forced to abort the mission because of the unfavourable weather. The 214 and 215 Squadron bombers continue with their bombing and flare dropping not knowing that the task force has retreated and their efforts, in the face of increasingly challenging weather conditions, are in vain.

*‘About the time the Handley Page crashed (1:30am), the weather became worse with rainstorms and poor visibility and no more than three of the six additional Handley Pages of Nos 214 and 215 Squadron, allocated for similar bombing attacks, reached the neighbourhood of their objectives.’* The War in the Air. Official History Volume 6.

Newly promoted Sergeant Dell was an the observer that night. His pilot was Lieutenant Snider, on his first operational mission as a pilot. They took off at 00:22. The aircraft was flying through thick dark cloud at 7,000 feet when novice pilot, Lieutenant Snider, let the aircraft fall into a side slip and start spinning. The plane spun down 5,000 feet, during which time all 3 crew members must all be painfully aware of Lt Snider’s inexperience and wondering if this was it. Eventually Snider regained control at 2,000 feet and Sgt Dell was able to fix their position. They returned safely to Coudekerque, after probably the longest 57 minutes of their young lives.

*‘Attempted raid on Ostend batteries with Lt Snider. Very dark night, was impossible to see the coastline at 2,000 feet. Off Nieuport we had trouble, the machine side slipped while passing through black clouds and the nose spun down to 2,000 feet before pilot could regain control. We managed to pick up the coast at Gravelines and returned to Aerodrome all OK’* Visibility very bad’. Dell has noted that it was *‘Lt. Snider’s First Raid as Pilot’*. At a later date he has added *‘(and last)’*

Date and Hour.	Wind Direction and Velocity.	Machine Type and No.	Passenger. See Remarks to Officers GUMMER Training.	Time in Air.	Height.	Course.	Remarks
LT SNIDER'S FIRST RAID AS PILOT. (AND LAST)						(CONTINUED)	PICK UP THE COAST AT GRAVELINES, AND RETURNED TO AERODROME ALL OK. VISIBILITY - VERY BAD.

It was to be an expensive night for the two Coudekerque Handley Page Squadrons, which lost three of the eleven aircraft that started out. In addition to Roy Allan and Paul Bewsher’s plane which crashed in the sea seven miles off Ostende and Bob Barker and Jack Hudson’s plane

that came down in Holland, a third aircraft was lost. H.P. 3129 was badly damaged on the raid to Zeebrugge. It did not drop its bombs but was hit by flak. The fabric was stripped off top wing centre section. It crashed making an emergency landing on the beach at Fort Mardyk. The crew; McIlraith, Matthews and Clark, were uninjured.

Major Brackley included the mission that night in his *Rough History* of the squadron that was completed in January 1919. *'The squadron, working with 207 squadron carried out a series of attacks on coastal batteries around Ostend and Zeebrugge, in conjunction with the Naval attempted landing. The weather was extremely bad and the enemy batteries were very active. The Naval attack however, did not materialise, owing to bad weather. 2 machines did not return'*

24<sup>th</sup> April 1918. Target Roulers Railway Junctions. Les Dell's aircraft limps home on one engine and crash lands. *'All would have been OK, but a small mound caught the starboard undercarriage and put us on the wing tip'* – Sgt. Dell

Sergeant Dell wrote this description of the mission, *'Handley Page 0/100 Tractor Biplane Bomber No. 3125. Starboard engine failure after bombing Roulers Railway Station. Force landed in a ploughed field on return, hit small hay rick, wrecked. Millain near Watten. Crew Lt. G. P. Armstrong, Sgt L.A. Dell, A.G. AW Murphy.'*

At least five 214 Squadron aircraft attacked important railway junctions on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> April 1918. Four machines targeted Courtrai, and one machine attacked Roulers. Three of the four Courtrai bound machines carried 14 x 112lb bombs. The last aircraft, flown by Captain Batchelor, carried three of the large 550lb bombs.

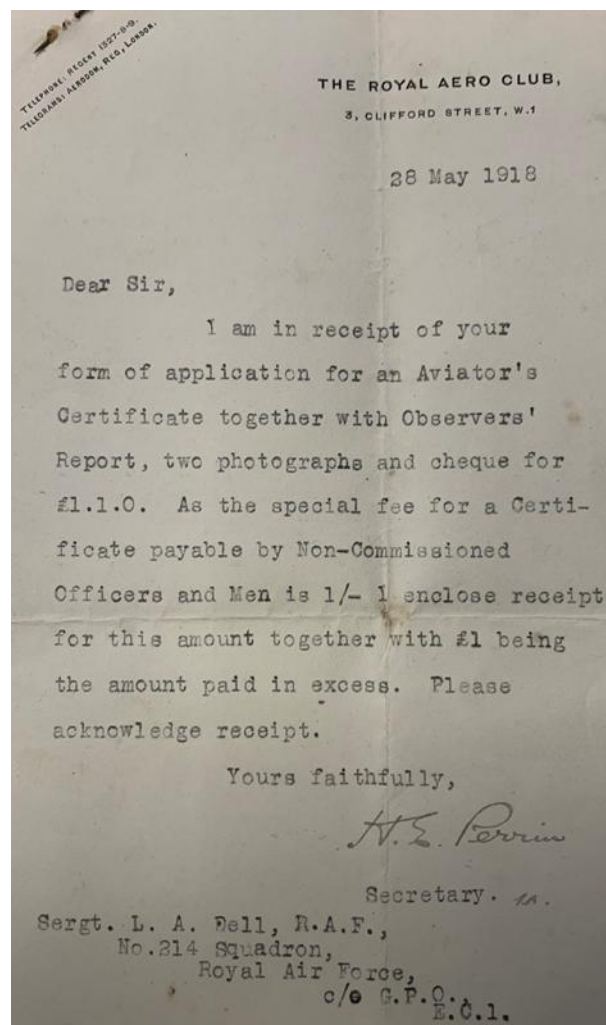
The aircraft attacking Roulers Railway Junction started dropping bombs at about 02:15. H.P. 3125 was being flown by a new Canadian pilot, a Lieutenant George Powell Armstrong, on his first ever raid. He was being looked after by the experienced observer, Sergeant Leslie Dell. They were lucky to get back 90 minutes later. After taking off at 01:25 Dell used Bergues and Ypres as navigation points on his way to Roulers. The weather was clear, but the crew soon started experiencing problems, as Sgt. Dell explained. *'We were just crossing the lines when we noticed our starboard engine was overheating and our radiator boiling. All attempts to throttle down failed to be of little use'*. The crew continued on, reached Roulers and started dropping their 14 x 112lb bombs. *'We reached our objective and I started to drop before reaching the town. 5 singles on the railway track and then 3 sets of 3. These were observed to burst amongst buildings near the railway. One bomb hung up and took over 10 minutes to get clear. When I came up I was unable to pick up our course, having drifted, so we steered North. The engine was now running very bad and we were losing height very quickly. Now only 1,000 feet up. The engine at last gave up the ghost and we were forced to land in a ploughed field.'*

*All would have been ok but a small mound caught the starboard undercarriage and put us in rather a 'hoary' on the wing tip'. Ref: Sgt Dell's Log Book. Boscombe Down Aviation Collection.*

Dell's pilot that night, Lt. Armstrong, a Canadian from Toronto, did not stay long with 214 Squadron. Unfortunately, he was to lose his life on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1918, from injuries received whilst flying. He was 23 years old when he was killed. He is buried in St Andrew's Church Yard at Cranwell. It is likely that he was posted to Cranwell as a flying instructor and lost his life in a flying accident and was buried a long way from home.

28<sup>th</sup> May 1918. Les Dell gets an unexpected refund from the Royal Aero Club

Sgt. Dell gets a big refund on the cost of his Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate. He sent in a cheque for 21 shillings. However Non-Commissioned Officers and Men only had to pay 1 shilling. He gets 20 shillings, £1 returned. This is the equivalent of £72 in 2025.







June 15<sup>th</sup> 1918. Mardyke Sands. Les Dell's aircraft gets stuck in the mud at Mardyke Sands and is unable to take-off for a raid on Zeebrugge and Bruges.

Since the start of June 1918, the German Air Force had launched a number of very damaging raids on the RAF Aerodromes located around Dunkerque with 6 or 7 raids on consecutive nights. At Coudekerque a number of men had been killed, aircraft destroyed and hangers blown down and set on fire. A number of measures were adopted to minimise the damage caused by this enemy action. For a number of weeks afterwards, 214 Squadron aircraft would fly to the wide sandy beaches on the coast, north east of Dunkerque and start and finish raids from there. They were able to disperse aircraft across the beach and it meant that they were not trying to land on the aerodrome at Coudekerque in the dark, with the risk of running into an undiscovered bomb crater. The damage at Coudekerque was so great that the decision was made to move 214 Squadron to a safer location at St Inglevert on the other side of Calais at the end of June.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Group. Dunkirk. Daily Report of Operations listed the targets visited by 214 Squadron on the night of 15<sup>th</sup> June 1918. One aircraft attacked the La Brugeoise Works in Bruges. One aircraft attacked the Zeebrugge-Bruges Canal. A third aircraft raided Thourout Railway Junction and Aerodrome. Three aircraft attacked Bruges Docks. The raids were carried out in poor visibility and once again started from the beach, after crews had left Coudekerque earlier. The Daily Report suggests that crews had difficulty observing the results of the bombing. It only comments on bursts in the Docks and Darses at Bruges.

Probably the most significant event for the squadron that night was the loss of H.P. 0/400 D5401. It was caught in the searchlights over Bruges and hit repeatedly by heavy and accurate Anti-Aircraft fire. Lt Freer managed to nurse the stricken plane as far as the lines where it crash

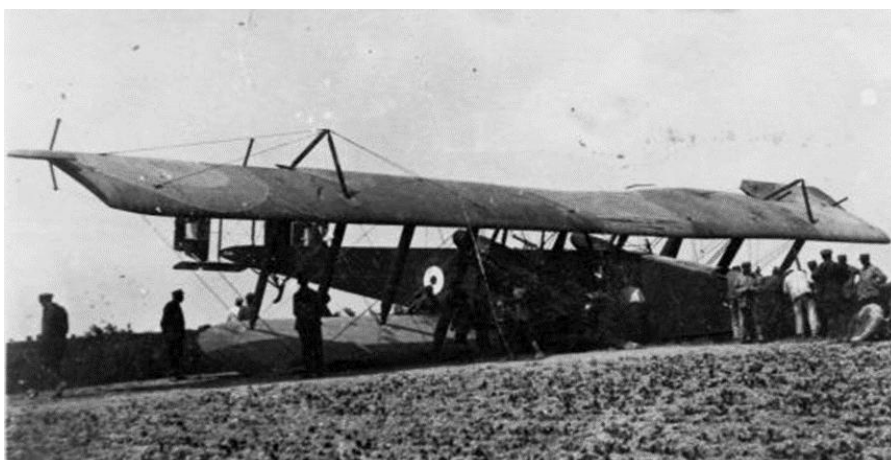
landed. The crew of Freer, Wardrop and Binckes were all safe, but the Germans destroyed the aircraft with artillery fire early the next day.

The January 1919, *Rough History of 214 Squadron*, described the incident and the fate of the aircraft, HP 5401. *'June 15th 1918. Bruges Docks. Whilst attacking Bruges Docks the intense barrage of A.A. fire resulted in the machine being hit in many places. Starboard engine was hit and put completely out of action. Pilot managed to cross the lines at 100 feet and made safe landing in full view of the enemy. Very shortly after, the machine received a direct hit which blew it to pieces.'*

At 21:35, Lt Nicholl piloting H.P. 3128 with Sgt Dell as observer and rear gunner Private Thomas took off from Coudekerque for the beach at Mardyk or Mardick Sands. Dell's log book described what happened, *'Went to sands at Mardick with Lt. Nicholls. Was unable to raid as stuck fast in soft sand so unable to take-off'*.

16<sup>th</sup> June 1918. Crashed on Take-off Engine Failure on take off for raid on Ostende, crashed on the Calais Road 17<sup>th</sup> May 1918. Crew Lt. J.M. Nichols, Sgt. LA Dell and Pte. Thorne.

The experienced Sergeant Dell is once again flying with a new pilot. Lieutenant Nichols was going on his first operational raid as pilot. This was supposed to have happened yesterday, but the plane got stuck in soft sand at the beach staging ground and could not take off. Today, Lieutenant Nichols heroic raid on Ostend with Sergeant Dell and Private Thomas in H.P. 3128 C1, lasted exactly 5 minutes! They took off at 21:38 and at 21:43 were *'crashed'* in a field. Sgt Dell's log book explains, *'Just after we left the drome, as we started to get our height, the starboard engine packed up. We did not have sufficient height or time to turn back to drome or sands so was forced to land in a ploughed field and unfortunately crashed'. (fault of engine – broken crankshaft')*.



*Lt. Nichol's HP 3128, C1, after crash landing on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1918. NMRN.YEORN  
2002/100/1795(JMB/GSL 03847)*

Despite his inexperience, Nichols did not make the basic error that killed so many aircrew, of turning back to the airfield with a dud engine. He avoided the temptation of turning, losing flying speed, stalling, getting into a spin and crashing the aircraft with fatal results. This basic error of turning back with a dud engine, was to be the likely cause of death British flying ace James McCudden. He would be killed in a crash after engine failure, three weeks later.

Corporal Wilkin's diary recorded the loss of the two aircraft that night. Unfortunately Corporal Wilkin's handwriting is not the easiest to decipher, being rather of a drunken spider nature! Wilkins identifies the different aircraft by the last two digits of their serial numbers. *'...but (31)28 conked ????? on Calais Rd. for some reason, and (D54)02 suffered fate of (31)28'* Corporal Wilkins diary writing regime was almost as bad as his handwriting, these events were described in his diary five weeks later, on July 23rd 1918.

7<sup>th</sup> July 1918. Target Bruges Docks. Sergeant Dell teams up with Lieutenant Ellison as his new pilot.

Attacking Bruges Docks on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1918 was observer Sergeant Dell in HP 9643 with a pilot he has not flown with before, a Lieutenant Ellison. The rear gunner is Ensign Fahy USNAS. The crew took off at 21:37 and flew direct from St. Inglevert to Bruges. They did not land at Mardick Sands first. The aircraft has a mixed bomb load; 4 x 250lb, 6 x 112lb, 4 x 25lb Coopers and 4 Michelin flares. Ellison's target was the eastern side of the dock. He recorded the mission in his log book, *'new observer...not got held (in search lights?)..good straddle'*. Ref: Leeds University. Liddle Collection/Air/106/HRW Ellison. They landed at 00:30 and had been in the air for 175minutes, three hours.

The Ellison-Dell team was to become a regular pairing over the next few months. Sergeant Dell's log books always contained much more detail about the flights they made than compared to Lieutenant Ellison's. It is interesting comparing their observations on the same raid from the same aircraft. Lt Ellison's log book entries are always brief and to the point, Sergeant Dell's provide much more detail. We have much to thank Sergeant Leslie Alexander Dell for! This was the same as the Brackley and Wardrop entries on their joint missions.

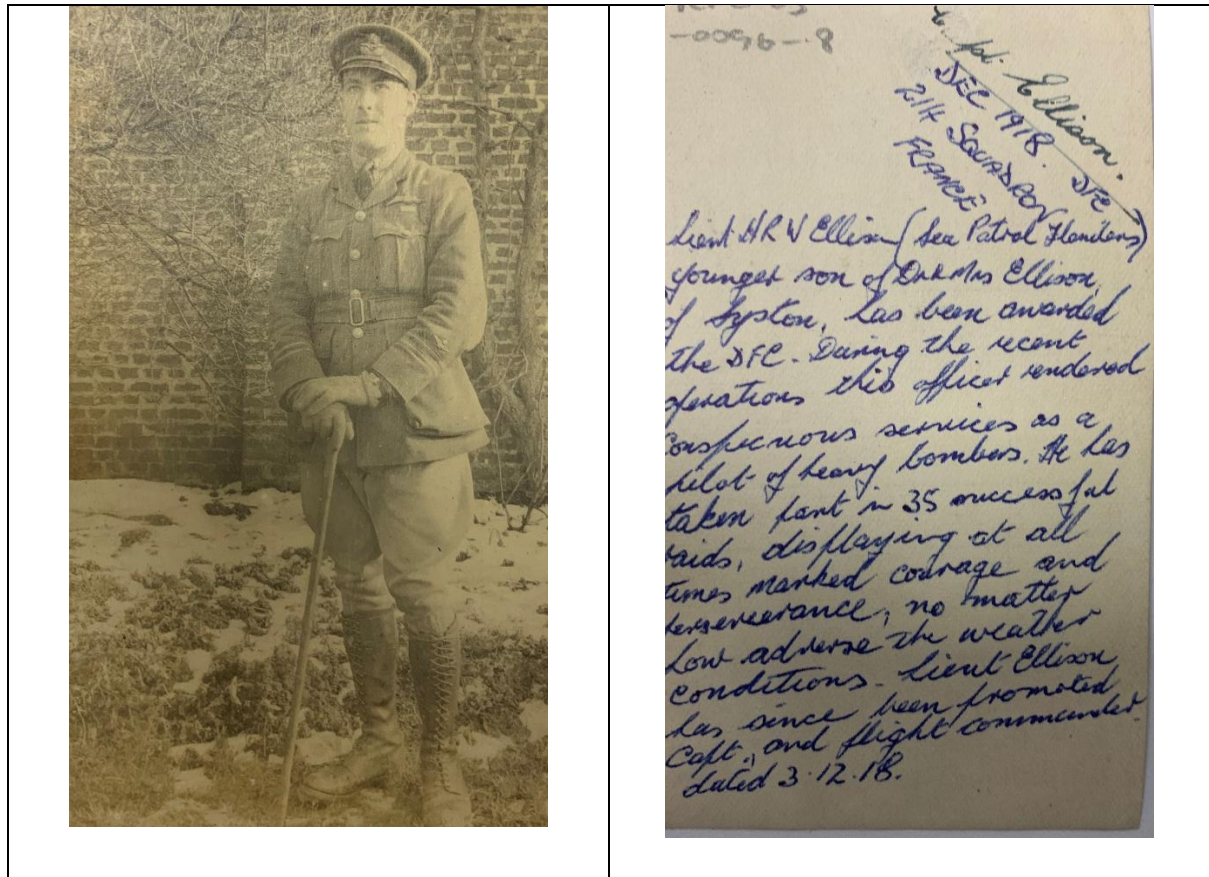
Dell recorded the route that night from St Inglevert; Calais – Dunkirk – Nieuport – Ghistelles – Bruges. They dropped their bombs at 23:17 from 8,000 and 7,000 feet. *'We attacked flying N. to S. Visibility very poor, so I dropped 2 x112s on the Bruges – Ostend Canal to wake things up.* As mentioned previously, Sergeant Dell kept two versions of his log book.

The first log book continues *'Fritz responded with 'Hate' and 'Green Onions' which gave us a good light over the objective. We took a steady straddle over the Northern Darse, dropping 4 x 250s, 4 x 112s, 2 x 25s. We turned N and dropped 2 x 25s on a searchlight at the mouth of the Leopold Canal – it went out'*. It looks like they returned along the coast to Calais and St Inglevert. They saw several enemy aircraft but were not attacked. Sergeant Dell clearly had an



opinion why this happened. 'Hun Scouts were observed off Ostend but they did not attack. Wind Up'.

Ellison and Dell's raid lasted just under three hours. They landed back on Mardick Beach at 00:32 after the raid. Why this was necessary, when the enemy is still attacking the Dunkirk area in numbers, when St. Inglevert was never ever attacked we do not know. They took off again at 04:27 for the half hour flight back from Mardick to St. Inglevert.

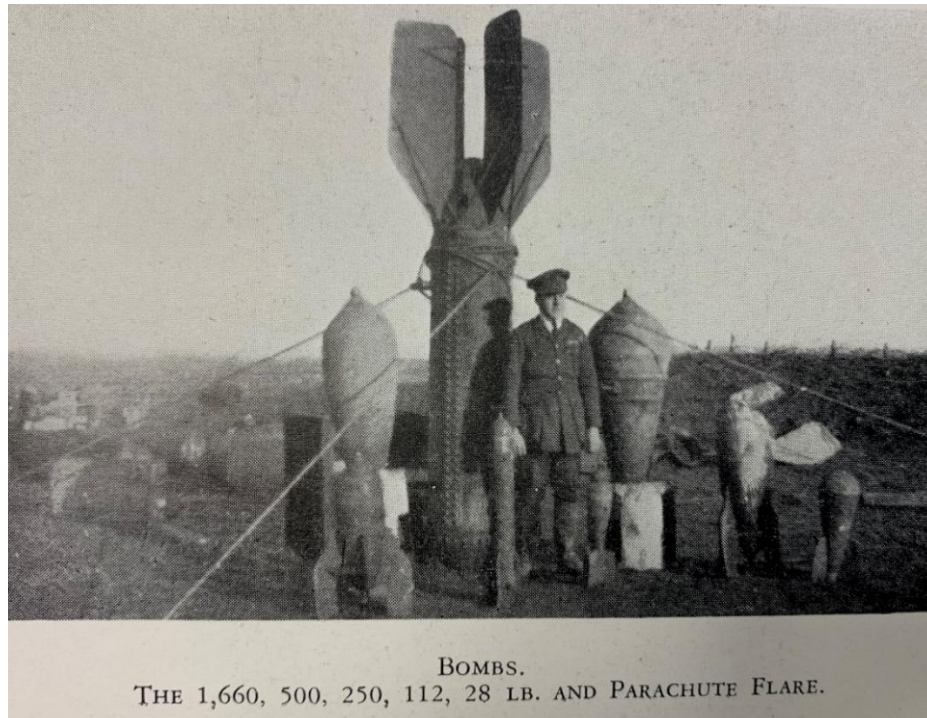


A photograph of Lieutenant H. R. W. Ellison. On the back, Les Dell had written out the citation for Ellison's Distinguished Flying Cross which was awarded on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1918. Leslie Alexander Dell correspondence with Norman Gilham. Used with the kind permission of the Royal Flying Corps Collection at Boscombe Down Aviation Collection museum.

24<sup>th</sup> July 1918. Target Middelkerke Ammunition Dump. 'First person to drop 1665lb bomb over enemy lines.'

On the night of 24<sup>th</sup> July 1918 214 Squadron dropped the RAF's first 1,650 lb SN bomb, on the enemy at Middlekerke. This was to be the heaviest bomb to be dropped by the RAF during the war. It was 11 feet long and three times heavier than the massive 550lb bombs that 214 Squadron crews regularly dropped on targets such as the Zeebrugge Lock Gates and the La

Brugeoise Works. The massive new bomb was to be dropped from H.P. 9643 by the crew of Lieutenant Ellison, Sergeant Dell and Ensign Fahy USNAS. The fact that Sergeant Leslie Dell, was chosen to be the first Observer to drop the new bomb, is a measure of the high regard in which he was held by the Commanding Officer Major Brackley and the other Flight Commanders.



Squadron Ordnance.

Image from *A Short History of No.14 Squadron Royal Naval Air Service and No 214 Squadron RAF*. W.E. Wardrop's papers. Used with permission of the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection

Lt Ellison's log book describes the mission as *'Bombing raid on Middlekerke and Dump'*, Sergeant Dell described it as a *'Raid on Middlekerke'*. Middelkerke is a small town on the Belgian coast halfway between Nieuport and Ostende. The target was well defended. Dell's account mentions searchlights, the Westende Battery, hostile aircraft and accurate Anti-Aircraft fire. Conditions for the raid were ideal, Ellison described a *'Brilliant Moon'* and Dell described visibility as being good with a full moon.

They took off at 21:28 flying north east along the coast via Gravelines, Dunkirk and Ostend and climbing to 8,500 feet. Dell's log book listed the load as one 1660lb bomb and noted that *'First bomb of this size to be dropped over enemy lines'* They dropped the single bomb at 00:28 from 6,000 feet. Dell described the raid in detail. *'We took three runs over the objective before I was able to drop. First run was from N.E. to S.W. at 5,000 feet. Had to turn out to sea again owing to being held in the searchlights and Westende Battery putting in good shooting. Hostile aircraft was also about, one machine passing very close to us but did not attack. Second run*

*was also N.E. to S. W. at 4,000 feet but we were again held in the lights. Third run was downwind S.W. to N.E. at 6,000 feet. The bomb was observed to drop on the N.E. of the town. Visibility-very good-full moon. Fair amount of A.A. and very accurate. Landed at Mardick.' The mission took 3 hours 42 minutes.*

Lt Ellison recorded in his log book. *'1<sup>st</sup> time the largest bomb had been dropped on active service. Had 3 attempts to get in and was also shot at by scout. It made a huge explosion and hole about 50 feet across and put out all S.L. (search lights) and A.A. (anti-aircraft fire). Interesting that Ellison says they were shot at by the enemy fighter but Dell saying that it passed close but did not attack.*

The following account of the effect of the raid has been extracted from the records of the 5th Group, Dover Patrol: *'.[The bomb] functioned successfully and all the lights in the town immediately went out and AA fire (which had been intense) stopped and was not renewed although a subsequent photograph showed that the bomb had dropped in a field about half a mile east of the town. The crater caused by the bomb had a diameter of over 50 feet and the spread of earth displaced covered an area over 100 yards in diameter.'*

14<sup>th</sup> October 1918 Target Melle. Sergeant Dell's last mission of the war. Lt Lewtas scores direct hits on an ammunition train with three 550lb bombs causing *'indescribable damage'*- Squadron Records

The squadron attacked Melle Railway Junctions and Sidings for the seventh time since the double raid on the night of the 28<sup>th</sup>/29<sup>th</sup> September. Seven of the last nine missions had been to Melle. A feature of the night's missions was the number of burning towns and villages left by the retreating Germans and rampant bomber crews of the Royal Air Force. Sergeant Wardrop counted fifteen separate fires and Sergeant Dell counted eighteen.

One early take-off was for the crew of Ellison, Dell and Second Lieutenant Tait. Dell timed this as 6:26 pm. Ellison and Dell were headed back to Melle to wreak more havoc on the retreating Germans and their railway infrastructure. They had a very mixed bomb load of 4 x 250lb, 6 x 112lb, 4 x 25lb, 4 x 16lb, 2 x 40lb Phosphorous and 2 Michelin Flares, to inflict damage on track, buildings and train waggons. Their journey to the target took just under 2 hours and Sergeant Dell recorded the route from St Inglevert in his log book. Calais-Ostend- Zeebrugge-Eecloo- Ghent to Melle. Dell started dropping the bombs at 8:22 pm.

Sgt Dell, *'Very dud when we left the ground. Very overcast and bad weather reported, but it was important that we raided. We were passing over Ghent Dock and approaching Melle when we saw bombs bursting from another machine and hitting the objective causing two large explosions and fires. When we reached the sidings the whole place was lit up by the explosions which kept taking place. We took four runs over it was easy work to get a hit every time. Numbers of trains could be seen and our bombs burst amongst them.*

*When we left the objective four fires were going strong. We received very little A.A. and searchlights were unable to hold us. On the return journey we were held for a few minutes by three searchlights at Wynghe. 'Woof'. Numerous villages and towns on fire along the line, caused by the Huns in their retreat. At one time I counted eighteen.*

*'Maria Aeltre and Ghistelles, active. Visibility very good when the moon was not behind the clouds. Landed at St Inglevert all O.K.'* They landed back at 9:59 pm, after a 3 hour 33 min mission. Dell took the plane back to base by a different route to the outward leg. From Melle he went, Aeltre (Aaltar?)- Thourout -Nieuport then along the coast to Calais.

Major Brackley's January 1919 'Rough History' described what happened. 'Melle Sidings, Ghent. *'During the early part of the Flanders Battle, Melle Sidings were choked with traffic. The squadron carried out many raids on this objective. On 14<sup>th</sup> October, Lieut. G.S. Lewtas scored direct hits with 3-550lb bombs on trains loaded with ammunition, causing indescribable damage all over the Sidings. The fires were a help to the other Pilots bombing the same objective.'*

October 28<sup>th</sup> – November 15<sup>th</sup> 1918 . Sergeant Dell has two and a half week's home Home Leave. When he returns the war is over.

6<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Les Dell and 214 Squadron are off to Egypt.

At 15:15, four heavily-laden Handley Page 0/400s lumbered down the grass strip at Camphin Aerodrome and clawed their way into the cloudy leaden skies of Northern France on the first leg of a 3,000 miles journey to a strip of desert sand in northern Egypt. Six other 214 Squadron Handley Pages, had already left Camphin, en route to Africa and the Middle East. The last aircraft to take off was HP 8323 with a crew of five. Flying the aircraft is the '1<sup>st</sup> Pilot', Lieutenant Taylor. The '2<sup>nd</sup> Pilot' is Pilot Observer Sergeant Dell. They have Sergeant Day as their Engineer and A/C Headley as Rigger. The fifth, and probably most important member of the crew, given what was to happen on the journey, is 214 Squadron's mascot, a lucky black cat, with an extremely politically incorrect name.

6<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Camphin to Paris.

Les Dell's log book, *'We left Camphin in formation with machines nos. 9696, 9643 and 3489. Owing to heavy clouds and mists we were forced to break away at Bray. We flew south and picked up the River Oise, which we followed to Pontoise, and from there steered 170 degrees for Versailles and landed at Buc drome at 5:30 pm. Visibility very poor. Petrol 94 gallons'*. The flight had taken 2 hours 15 minutes.

Sergent Dell added an extra note to the log book stating that HP 3489 had crashed near Pontoise. One source has it crashing due to poor visibility at Pontoise.

10<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Paris to Marseilles.



*'The weather was still very uncertain and inclined to rain when we left the ground at Buc. Very thick clouds over Molun. From the Aerodrome on our left they fired white rockets as we passed over. Continued journey over Berune, Chalon and Lyon. Visibility much clearer at Orange and perfect at Mirimas. Landed at the wrong drome at Istres so had to take off again. Very hot here had two burst tyres. Took on 250 gallons of petrol.'* The flight at 5,000 feet had taken 5 hours and 30 minutes.

Sergeant Dell added a sad footnote to this part of the journey. *'At Marseilles we learnt that one of our m/c H.P. 4591, had been forced to land in the mountains through engine trouble. M/c crashed and fired. All crew killed. Pilots Lt. Sumner and Lt. Hall. Engineer Corporal Flintoff. Rigger Corporal Jaffe.'* According to Sturtivant and Page the aircraft, D4591, crashed at 08:00 on the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> July at a place called Trets near Draguignan between Toulon and Marseilles.

### 13<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Marseilles to Pisa.

HP 8323 took off sometime between 07:00 and 09:00 for a 5 hour 6 minute flight to Pisa. It seems that the weather was much improved. *'Splendid trip. We had to fly above the clouds from Nice to Sarzana, as the mountains were 5,000 feet and the clouds below. We picked up the coast at Spezia and passed over Viareggio to Pisa.'*

*'As we came down to land very strong bumps were experienced. Landed ok. New rudder controls fitted. Took on 162 gallons of petrol.'*

### 14<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Pisa to Rome.

They took off at 11:50, climbing to 4,500 feet and headed to Rome. *'Very bumpy flying up to 3,000 feet. We kept mostly to the coast owing to heavy clouds over the land. Landed on Cente-Cello Aerodrome, just south of Rome. Visibility very good. Filled up with 235 gallons of petrol.'* The flight had taken 3 hours 50 minutes.

### 18<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Rome to Taranto.

Sergeant Dell swapped aircraft with Lieutenant Price and flew on H.P. 4578. They had good weather as they flew over the Appenines and then south along the Adriatic coast towards Taranto. *'Changed places with Lt. Price...I took the wheel from Terracina to Taranto. We left the western coast at Gaete and passed over Benevento, Foggia to Barletta then down the coast to Bari and across to Taranto. Visibility splendid. Landed O.K. Filled up with 220 gallons of petrol. Two aileron control wires changed'*. The flight had taken 4 hours and 50 minutes.

### July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1919. Taranto to the Isle of Crete.

HP 8323 took off at 12:25. Dell was back with his crew and the cat. *'We passed over Otaranto at 12:35 and crossed the Adriatic to the island of Corfu, from there down the Greek coast passing over Prevesa, Vonitsa, Pyrgos, Kalamata then across the Mediterranean to the Isle of*

*Crete. Unfortunately we were unable to reach our destination owing to a shortage of petrol, and were forced to land on the beach near Armyro'. They had been in the air for 7 hours and 35 minutes so it is not surprising they ran out of fuel.*

*'A British destroyer, H.M.S. Swallow, came to our assistance about midnight and we arranged for them to have petrol conveyed to us by motor launch. We had to stay here two days before it arrived'. Being paid by the Government to be on a beach in Crete for two days doing nothing. Bummer!*

July 24<sup>th</sup> 1919. Armyro Beach Crete to Suda Bay Crete.

*Today's flight for Sergeant Dell and Lieutenant Taylor was much shorter, at 30 minutes, than their previous flight flying all the way from Italy to Crete. They took off at 4pm, but it was likely that the late start was due to the time it took to get the aircraft into a position on the beach where it could take off from as the sand was rather soft in places. 'After great difficulty we managed to get the machine moved from the soft sand onto a portion of beach suitable for take-off. Decided to send the two mechanics to Suda Bay by motor launch, in case we had difficulty in taking off. All went well, tho' the machine nearly turned over twice, as we ran over the soft sand. Landed on the Aerodrome at Suda Bay all O.K. Glorious weather but very bumpy flying. Took on 348 gallons of petrol'.*

26<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Suda Bay Crete to Mersa Matruh North Africa. The most challenging leg. *'Out of sight of land for three hours'.*

*The crew of 8323 started at 09:20 but could not set a direct course across the Mediterranean due to Crete's high and mountainous terrain. 'Had to pass right around the island of Crete owing to very high mountains. Steered a compass course of 172 degrees while crossing the Mediterranean. Out of sight of land for three hours. At 11:30 passed one steam boat steering south west. 13:15, Picked up the African coast then steered east to Mersa Matruh. Landed on the sand between two lakes. During the night the landing ground was flooded and we were stuck fast in the sand'. It had taken them 5 hours and 10 minutes to make the Mediterranean crossing.*

28<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Mersa Matruh to Heliopolis Aerodrome, Cairo.

*'Left the ground at day break (05:10), splendid morning for flying. We followed the coast to Alexandria, then down the Nile to Cairo. Landed on the Aerodrome at Heliopolis. Visibility fair. Clouds at 4,000 feet detached. Here we learnt that we had another eighty miles to go before we reached our destination.' Flying time was 3 hours 30 minutes.*

29<sup>th</sup> July 1919. Heliopolis to Abu-Sueir.

It is likely that Sergeant Dell and the rest of the crew of HP 8323 took the opportunity to do some sightseeing in Cairo, as they did not set off to fly the final 80 miles until the late afternoon of the next day. Given what was happening along the route to the other aircraft flying from France, I do not think that they were in any danger of a getting into trouble for taking another day to get to Abu-Sueir. *'Left Heliopolis flying N.E. until we reached the Ismailia Canal. This we followed to Abu-Sueir. Our aerodrome lay on the north side. Landed all O.K. We were the last machine to leave Camphin and the fourth to arrive at Abu-Sueir'.*

HP 8323's epic 3,000 mile journey from northern France to Egypt was completed in 23 days 39 hours and 26 minutes of flying time. The flying time from Paris to Cairo today is 4 hours 55 minutes. Sergeant Del and his crew were the lucky ones. According to E.C. Baldwin a L.A.C. Fitter with 214 Squadron, 30% of the machines had been destroyed on the journey from France. *'Ten planes from 214 left Camphin, of which three were lost and seven arrived at Abu-Sueir.*

Dell arrived in Abu-Sueir on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1919 and in the next six months, between then and 31<sup>st</sup> December 1919, when he was demobbed, he only recorded details of five flights in his log book. The nature of the flights shown in Dell's log book have nothing much to do with establishing a Middle East Training Brigade and much more about Colonial Policing by Paralyser. Despite the inactivity and boredom of this Egypt posting, it appears that Sergeant Dell did manage to get behind the controls and flew aircraft in Egypt.

7<sup>th</sup> December 1919. Les Dell's last mission with 214 Squadron. *'Patrol of the railway and escort to the train taking Lord Milner to Cairo'* Sergeant Dell.

Three machines from 214 Squadron spent the morning 'riding shot-gun' over the train taking Lord Milner from the port of Ismailia on the Suez Canal to Cairo. Lord Milner was Secretary of State for the Colonies. He had been a leading British delegate at the Paris Peace Conference and a signatory to the 1919 Treaty Of Versailles. This led to the 1919 Arab Revolts and the real reason why three squadrons of Handley Pages were rushed to Egypt. It is likely that the presence of the new Secretary of State to the Colonies would inflame tensions around Cairo at this time

The RAF were taking no chances with Lord Milner's safety as Sergeant Dell's log book explains. *'Ismailia and Tel-El-Kebir Patrol. Patrol of the railway and escort to the train taking Lord Milner to Cairo. Three machines from 214 Squadron took part. One machine flew over a decoy train which kept five miles in front of the special with Lord Milner and staff, which I had to escort and the third machine scouted around.'*

*We were armed with machine guns, Coopers Bombs, also smoke bombs and Very Lights. There was no trouble on the way though it was expected, and several times we had to drive natives away from the lines'.* Sergeant Dell flew the two hour 10 minute mission in HP 9646 at the relatively low height of 500 feet. The aircraft had a crew of four rather than the normal three on this mission with the additional man manning machine guns if required.

31<sup>st</sup> December 1919. Last Flight with 214 Squadron. *'Went up for my Last Trip. Wish I were flying home'*.

Today was to be Sergeant Dell's last day with 214 Squadron. He was being demobbed and returning back to the U.K. Before leaving Abu-Sueir he had one last flight in a Handley Page bomber. Fittingly, he took the controls of HP 8323, the aircraft that he had helped to fly out from France to Egypt, six months ago. He got into the pilot's seat and took off for his very last trip. Next to him was another important member of the squadron, one who Dell had obviously formed a close personal relationship with. The small black cat that had been with them in the aircraft on their epic flight from Europe to Africa at the end of July came along too. Dell took HP 8323 up to 7,500 feet and flew for three hours over Egypt.

I think that Sergeant Dell would have enjoyed the solitude, just him and the cat, flying over the desert and probably over the Sphinx and the Pyramids at Giza. It would probably have been three hours during which he reflected on his time in the Royal Naval Air Service and Royal Air Force and thought of lost comrades and lucky escapes. He had survived the Great War and the appalling food at Abu-Sueir was going home.

There is a photograph of Sergeant Dell holding the little black cat squadron mascot in the archives of the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton. Dell is in shorts and he is standing under the front cockpit of a Handley Page O/400. The aircraft has the name 'Ivy' as a piece of nose art on the plane. Ivy was the name of Sergeant Dell's wife that he had left behind in England. It is not clear when the photograph was taken. Dell had a copy of the photo pasted into his log book for July 26<sup>th</sup> 1919. This was the day that Dell flew from Suda Bay in Crete to Mersa Matruh in North Africa.

Dell labelled the photograph *'Myself, passenger and bus'*. In addition, he annotated the photograph with a line pointing to the drift bomb sight on the front cockpit on which something is attached, *'My mascot which took part in over 50 raids'*.





*Sgt Dell with the Squadron Cat. Dell's passenger for his last flight in a Handley Page before being demobbed*

'Named Ivy on nose, after Dell's wife, with Ivy leaf insignia'

Handley Page 0/400 D8323 'Ivy' 214 Squadron. Sgt. Pilot. L.A. Dell with black cat mascot  
YEORN 2002/100/1847

Sergeant Dell had had a remarkable career in the Air Force. At a later date he has added up his flying hours from all his log books and totalled up the number of missions he had flown since joining the Royal Naval Air Service. Since being posted to No. 3 Wing RNAS he had completed 94 missions over the Lines.

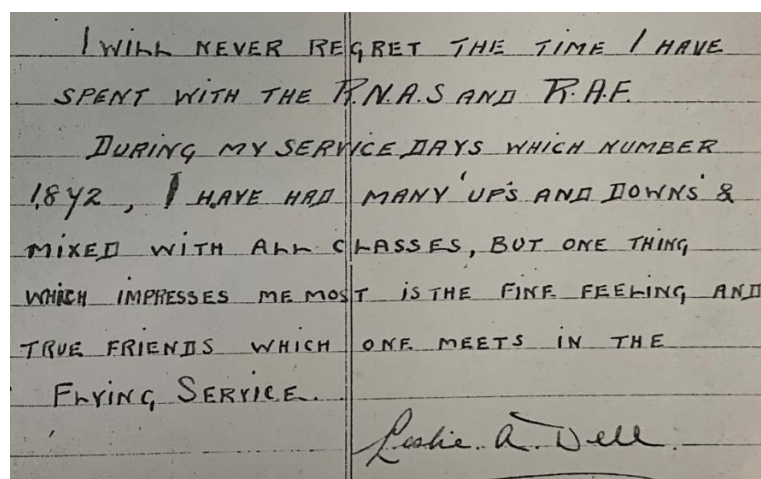
- He had completed 1,872 Service Days since joining up
- 28 Reconnaissance and Fighting Patrols with No. 3 Wing
- 11 Day Bombing Raids with No. 3 Wing.
- 22 Photographic Reconnaissance Patrols with No. 2 (N) Squadron
- 33 Night Bombing Raids on Handley Page bombers with No. 7(A) N, No. 14 (N) and 214 Squadron. 355 hours and 5 minutes.

Section 6 on the back of the 'Certificate of Employment During the War' form, that Dell left the Air Force with, was for *'Special remarks as to the qualifications or work done during employment with reference to the above'*. It was completed by a Flight Officer who probably did not know all that Dell had achieved during the war. *'This NCO was engaged as a combatant Pilot up to the cessation of hostilities. His work as usual was always thoroughly satisfactory'*. I feel that this is a totally inadequate summary of Sergeant Dell's excellent service for his country over the previous five years. A scant and totally inadequate reference for a man who will be looking for gainful employment. I hope he was able to secure a job quickly in this Land Fit for Heroes.

Sergeant Dell's last entry into his log book was a reflection of his flying career with the Navy and Air Force. *'I will never regret the time that I have spent with the RNAS and RAF. During my Service Days which number 1,872, I have had many ups and downs and mixed with all classes, but one thing that impresses me most is the fine feeling and true friends which one meets in the flying service.'*

*Sergeant Leslie Alexander Dell was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal for his service.*

**Citation. 'This non-commissioned officer has taken part in over 30 raids. He is an exceptionally keen observer and a very good navigator. During recent ops he has been conspicuous in his skill in dropping bombs, causing heavy loss to the enemy.'**



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