

Pembrokeshire Life

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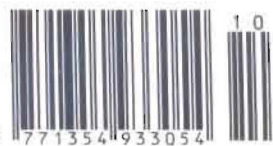
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*The building
of Skokholm
Lighthouse*

**Historic car is back on the road
The pipe man of Pembroke Dock
WWI Centenary – Special focus
Bristol connections**

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Heather Payton tells the story of a Pembrokeshire airman whose WWI diaries paint a vivid picture of the battle for the skies over France

An airman's tale

DAVID Sambrook, like many of his time, had a talent for understatement. 'A damned rough day' was his description of one particularly hair-raising exploit when, as a young airman, he'd set out on a July morning in 1917 to bomb a German-held aerodrome in Belgium.

It was his job to aim the bombs from his De Havilland DH4 biplane. But the raid went wrong. The Germans were waiting for them, and their fighter escort from the Royal Flying Corps kept its distance.

'We got it pretty thick going over, there were Hun machines everywhere', Sambrook was to write in his diary that night. He watched his bombs explode among a group of German planes on the ground, but one of the British pilots was badly injured and two more suffered bullet wounds, with both their aircraft brought down. A third machine was riddled with bullet holes and rendered useless.

WILLIAM David Sambrook – David as he was known – came from Cilgerran, joined No 5 Wing of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and was posted to Coudekerque airfield near Dunkirk in France in April 1916. He was 22.

It was a huge change from his job as a clerk. But his ability with the written word would shine through as he kept a record of his war.

His story, as set out in his diaries and log-books, will be part of an exhibition in the village of Llangwm in November marking the centenary of the start of World War One hostilities. They tell of almost daily bombing raids on German airfields and Zeppelin sheds and friends who failed to return.

It was not until near the end of the war that David graduated as a fully fledged pilot, though by then he was not without hands-on experience. 'Had a try at taking control', he wrote in June 1917. 'Damned funny'.

One of the most memorable passages in the diary was an account of an extraordinary – and touching – incident involving German pilots. 'Dunkirk is in a bit of a mess' he wrote at the end of May 1916.

Shortly before, a German squadron had bombed Coudekerque airfield and, as he put it, 'played utter hell'.

'Searchlights could not locate them as it was a starry night and the guns were firing at random, with the shrapnel falling all around us. It was a perfect bugger while it lasted'.



William David Sambrook
DSM.

The following night, No 5 Wing retaliated with a raid on the German-held Ostend aerodrome. One of their pilots, returning in pitch darkness, crash landed and was badly hurt. But another, Viney (Taunton Elliott Viney DSO, a South African), failed to return.

With no official communication with the enemy there was just one option. A colleague flew over Ostend and dropped a note to the Germans asking them if they had any news of the missing man. The Germans replied.

'They dropped a message stating that Viney's machine was shot down and dropped into the sea. Attempts were made at rescue but when the machine was brought in, the pilot was already dead, and he was buried with full military honours'.

The German pilots included photographs of the funeral and the grave.

According to Alan Wakefield of the Imperial War Museum this type of incident, and the respect it suggests between enemies, was not unknown.

"This sort of thing happened more with pilots," he said. "In the air, unlike in the war on the ground, it was one against one, pilot against pilot; there was a fellow feeling among airmen."

"In one case a German pilot attacked a British airfield. But first he dropped a signed note telling them what he was planning, and suggesting they get out of the way."

Sometimes the fraternisation became personal. "In some cases," Wakefield said, "if the plane was forced down but the pilot was not killed or injured they'd whisk him back to their base and give him a meal in the mess before the German army came to take him prisoner."

ONE of the main tasks of the Royal Naval Air Service was to spot German U-boats and force them under-water.

In the early days of the war they used airships to this end but later deployed seaplanes offensively.

But the Navy also needed to deal with the Zeppelins that



David Sambrook with a De Havilland
DH4, one of the first aircraft he flew in.

were causing so much destruction across the channel in England, and the seaplanes, with their heavy floats, were proving too unwieldy.

The answer was to equip ships with aircraft that could take off and land on their decks – quite a tall order – but the advent of the Sopwith Pup, with its short take-off run, solved the problem.

The plane required a runway of just 20 feet, providing the ship was steaming into a 20 knot wind! Sambrook, by now a qualified pilot, made his first such flight from HMS *Pegasus* in September 1918 – commenting later that the plane ‘dropped a bit’ as it left the deck.

The next flight was more successful. The problem however was landing, and after unsuccessful attempts resulted in fatalities, pilots were told either to land ashore or ditch alongside, to be craned back on board. The practice was known as ‘deck flying’ and ceased only when the first true aircraft carrier, HMS *Argus*, was launched in the autumn of 1918.

LIFE as an airman had its moments of relief, with attempts made to entertain the men. ‘We have had a piano at the camp and held a concert. The CO, Spencer Grey distributed cigs, cigars, chocolate and beer’.

Then again a couple of weeks later, Sambrook writes of having tea at the British mission with the Belgian army after having to make a forced landing with engine failure on the beach at La Panne. While he was taking tea, a mechanic flew down from Coudekerque and repaired the engine.

But there was also homesickness, certainly in the early days. A month after arriving at Coudekerque he went up on his first patrol one chilly morning. ‘Saw England distinctly in the distance. Made me feel – so-so’.

The next day his mate Parker suffered a broken ankle and Sambrook visited him in St Malo hospital. ‘He was quite cheerful and leaves for England in a few days. Lucky dog!’.

And then a week later he was shelled during a patrol.

landed safely but was told to be ready to go up again any minute. ‘For the first time feel the effects of strain’, he wrote.

And there were the deaths of course: Viney who was buried by the Germans, and Beard (George Henry Beard DSC) whose body was found in the sea two weeks after his colleagues saw him being attacked by a German Fokker.

But also narrow escapes. One day in August 1916 three aircraft went off to bomb Zeppelin sheds at Namur. One pilot returned with all his bombs owing to engine trouble, another dropped his bombs on a shed but came under intense fire and had to land on his way home with engine failure.

The third, Jamieson, was seen to drop his bombs, but didn’t return. ‘He was the best pilot on station’, commented Sambrook.

In fact Jamieson (Colin William Jamieson, one of the many Australians in No 5 Wing) survived the incident. Published diaries of another pilot, New Zealander Donald Harkness, show that



David Sambrook (right) with pilot colleague Charles Roger Lupton DSC who was to be killed in action in May 1918.

Jamieson became lost flying above cloud and eventually ran out of fuel and crash landed in a ploughed field in Holland. That country was neutral but as was the practice Jamieson was interned and assumed to be having ‘a high old time’. (His aircraft was eventually sold to the Dutch and is now said to be on display in a museum in Brussels).

Soon afterwards the same fate befell Harkness when he crash landed in Holland after being hit by shrapnel.

A REMARKABLE proportion of the men of No 5 Wing were decorated. It was customary to record the name of the pilot in command of the aircraft in the logbook for every trip, and one name that occurred frequently in Sambrook’s entries was ‘Bartlett’ [Charles Philip Oldfield Bartlett].

One day in September 1917 it appeared proudly as ‘Bartlett DSC’. Bartlett had received his decoration days earlier for his part in a bombing raid on Houtlave airfield. Sambrook was with him on that day, aiming the bombs.

His logbook entry reads: ‘Five of us shoved off at five-thirty. I straddled a big hangar with bombs, we set a big shed on fire. Three Huns attacked us, I had a pot at two of them’.

Sambrook, not yet an officer, received the DSM, possibly as a result of this incident.

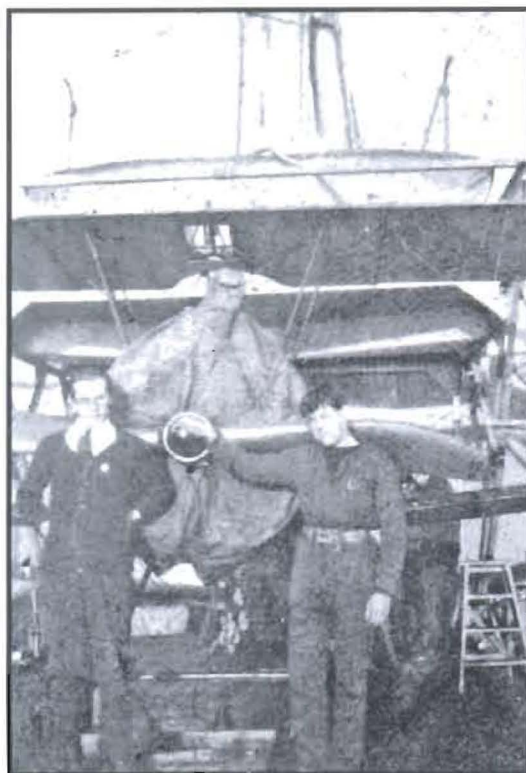
And he was to survive the war, ending his career as chief administrative officer at the public health department of Westminster City Council.

His nephew Richard Palmer, who has kept the logbook and diaries safe, remembers him as a lovely man.

‘He would send us Twickenham rugby match programmes and he kept my brother and myself supplied with rugby boots. But he never spoke to us about his war record,’ he said.

Sambrook eventually returned to the house in Deerland, Llangwm where Richard Palmer still lives. He died in 1963 at the age of 69.

• David Sambrook’s story will be featured in an exhibition marking the World War One centenary in Llangwm Village Hall, November 4 – 10, 2.30 to 8 pm.



David Sambrook and friend with his Sopwith hoisted on board HMAS Sydney for takeoff