

Harry Norman John Gibson and the Royal Naval Air Service

Harry Norman John Gibson joined the Royal Naval Air Service (R.N.A.S.) on the 20th May 1916 “for service in land operations”. He was on the books of *H.M.S. PRESIDENT II* in Yarmouth from May until 17th November 1916 when he was based at Crystal Palace for a month before transferring to the Eastern Mediterranean. *H.M.S. PRESIDENT II* was a Naval Accounting base for servicemen deployed in various places around the country.

In 1908, the British government recognized that the use of aircraft for military and naval purposes should be pursued. By 1912 the Royal Flying Corp had been formed and a number of its assets were transferred to support the Royal Navy. The Royal Naval Air Service was officially formed on 1 July 1914, just a month before the outbreak of the War. Its tasks were fleet reconnaissance, patrolling coasts for enemy ships and submarines; attacking enemy coastal territory and later, attacking enemy targets much further inland. At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the RNAS had 93 aircraft, six airships, two balloons and 727 personnel. The aircraft were a variety of Sopwith Pups, Camels, 1½ Strutters, Triplanes, Short S.184s and others, all being developed by different companies; some modified as sea planes, but none yet ship launched. The weapons consisted mainly of hand held or sometimes lightly mounted and synchronized machine guns, and hand dropped 20lb bombs – these probably being fairly volatile. For Harry Gibson the role of an aircraftsman was of a semi-skilled nature, but he would have been instructed in many different tasks including moving, servicing, refuelling, and loading the aircraft for action. Bomb loading was most likely one of those tasks. In today’s Navy his official title would have been Air Craft Handler.

Harry Gibson joined the RNAS during exciting times – 1916 was only 13 years after the Wright Brothers first powered flight, which lasted a total distance of 120 feet, and hence the speed of development of the aeroplane into something useful to support the war effort on many fronts was nothing short of meteoric. Of course the construction of the aircraft was rudimentary by today’s standards and depended on the lightweight materials available, wood and fabric, held together with wire and string. The dead giveaway is the somewhat basic design of the propellers, made of wood, and depicted on the RNAS badge (on today’s Service Sheet).

In late 1916, Harry was transferred to RNAS MUDROS in the North Aegean Sea off Greece where he was part of No 2 Wing. Mudros was a small Greek port on the Mediterranean island of Lemnos. It gained wartime significance with the determination of the Allies - chiefly the British and largely through the enthusiasm of Winston Churchill in the early part of 1915 - to attempt to seize control of the Dardanelles Straits, some 50km away. It remained the Allied base for the blockade of the Dardanelles for the duration of the war and was a principal base during the Salonika campaign in Greece.

Harry’s Naval Service Record shows that his death was caused by “accidental bomb explosion”. Nowadays this would be described as a “Weapon Accident”. The report in the *Darwlish Gazette* stated that his death occurred ‘on Whit-Sunday by the accidental explosion of bombs.’ He is buried at Struma Military Cemetery approximately 50 miles from Salonika.

H.N.J.GIBSON is shown on the Devon Roll of Honour but date & place of death are empty.

The Commonwealth War Graves entry states:

GIBSON, HARRY NORMAN JOHN Air Mechanic 2nd Class F/14744 27/05/1917

Age: 19 Royal Naval Air Service, "F" Sqdn. 2nd Wing. H.M.S. "President II."

Grave Ref: II. H. 5. [Struma Military Cemetery](#), Kalokostron, Greece.

He is commemorated on the Dawlish War Memorial; the inscription shows him as:

GIBSON H.N.J. AIRCRafTsmAn R.A.F.

(In April 1918 the Royal Naval Air Service was merged with the Royal Flying Corp to become the Royal Air Force. The War Memorial was not erected until 1921).