

## Dr. John Edward George Mosby

Those of us who were at Wymondham College in the early 1950s, just after it opened, will recall the Warden of the College, Dr. Mosby. He was a small, elderly, learned looking gentleman who clearly had a senior position but I was never quite clear, nor am I still, on what his function was. He did not have a teaching role and so I guess that he was responsible for the non teaching functions of the college – sick bay, buildings, etc etc.

How different the attitude might have been for those of us who had been brought up on a diet of Capt. W.E. Johns, Biggles and other tales of daring do against the dastardly Boch, had we known that this quiet, elderly gent was a flying hero of WW1. So I think a few notes on his history might be in order.

John E. G. Mosby was born on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1894 at Highley in Shropshire. His father was Arthur Mosby and he had married Emily Smith at Lincoln late in 1892. In the 1891 census Arthur Mosby was living as a lodger in Garforth, Leeds and was working as a 29 year old colliery deputy.

Clearly by 1894 they had moved to Shropshire but by 1901 the family were living in Ely, Cambs. and Arthur was then working on his own account as a “colliery, coal and brewers agent”. Six year old John is living with them.

In the 1911 census John Mosby is a visitor at 52, St. Giles Street in Norwich. He is 16 years old and at school. In 1911 most working class boys had left school on reaching the age of 14 and were employed as agricultural labourers or similar. John is obviously destined for better things.

Britain declared war on Germany on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, after the Germans invaded Belgium.

John Mosby is one of the first people to join up. He is registered as being a temporary 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1914. He was just 20 years old.

The RGA were equipped with the very heaviest artillery. Initially these were used to guard harbours and other strategic home bases. It soon became clear that they were required on the Western Front to bombard the enemy trenches and artillery.

John did not go overseas until at least 1916 as he was disallowed the 1914-15 star, which was for those that had fought overseas in that period (British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index cards).

It is not clear when he switched to the Army Flying Corps (AFC), which became the RAF in 1918.

Our next glimpse of John is when he is awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) whilst in the RAF in 1918. It is worth quoting the full citation for his award.

“T/Lt John Edward George Mosby, 4 Squadron, RAF.

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty while on an artillery patrol. He was attacked by the enemy machines, two from the front and one from the rear. He engaged and drove off the latter but was hit in the abdomen and when he turned to engage the others his pilot was hit and instantly killed. Although his machine fell out of control from 3,060ft to 1000ft he contrived to engage them, and was again hit in the abdomen. But he succeeded in driving them off and though his machine again became out of control he righted it and safely landed it at his aerodrome. He showed indomitable pluck, both during an unequal contest, and in determining to land his machine without injury, although nearly unconscious from lack of blood.”

The citation itself says a lot about the courage of John Mosby but when you realise the detail of what he achieved it is even more impressive.

From June 1917 until the Armistice in November 1918 Number 4 Squadron of the RAF was flying a bi-plane designated the RE8. This was a two seater bi-plane with the pilot in the front and the observer/rear gunner in the rear seat. This aircraft was used primarily for artillery observation and photography. It did not have a good reputation being considered “unsafe” and difficult to fly. It was fitted with a 140hp V12 engine which gave it a max speed of 103mph and a ceiling height of around 13,500 ft.

Whilst it was possible to fit the RE8 with a forward facing machine gun, firing through the propeller by using an interrupter gear, this was rarely the case as the interrupter gear was in short supply and those that were available went to fighter planes. Instead the forward gun was mounted on the port side outside of the propeller arc. This could be sensibly reached by the pilot in the front seat.

Basic flight controls were fitted in the rear cockpit which folded away when not in use. These were connected to the elevators, rudder and throttle but not the ailerons and were intended to give observers a chance of making a forced landing if the pilot were killed or incapacitated.

We begin to see the real difficulties that John Mosby, the observer/rear gunner, found himself in. Having driven off the German fighter to the rear and receiving a wound to the abdomen he turns to see that his pilot has been killed and the aircraft is diving steeply. It seems likely that his first action would be to unfold his controls and bring the aircraft out of its dive.

The citation says that he succeeded in driving off the other two attackers. From drawings and photographs of the RE8 it does not seem possible that the rear gun could be turned to be forward facing so it is likely that the enemy had followed him down in his dive and were now behind the RE8 so that he could engage them with his rear facing gun. The situation if they were in front is almost beyond belief as he would have to be almost out of his cockpit and leaning past his dead pilot to operate the gun on the port side.

That he brought the aircraft home and landed it safely with his rudimentary controls suggests that John Mosby had considerable flying experience before this incident.

A few months later, with the war finished less than a month, the RE8 was declared totally obsolete.

In December 1922 John married Dorothy Oldroyd in Norwich. He was the living at 12, Wood Street, Norwich and working as a schoolmaster. Arthur Mosby, his father died in 1923 and also gave 12, Wood Street as his address.

Our next glimpse of John Mosby is in 1939 when he and Dorothy are living at Forehoe and Hensted in Norfolk. He is still a school master and both he and Dorothy are acting as Air Raid Wardens.

In 1951, the year that he started his job as warden of Wymondham College, his wife, Dorothy, died. Four years later he married Dorothy's sister Agatha in Norwich. He passed away in 1972, again in Norwich.

With one of the little coincidences which seem to happen more frequently as we get older, I find that No.4 Squadron finished its days at RAF Wittering, just three miles from my home, but now flying Harriers.

