

# Cedric Ernst Howell

1896-1919

Husband, Leader, and Pioneer



## Ernst Cedric Howell

It is 1914 and the driving force of nationalism is moving at an unstoppable pace. The young 20<sup>th</sup> Century has yet to break loose from the iron shackles placed upon its predecessor. People cheer joyously in the streets of their towns and cities. The day to test their country's strength has finally dawned.



ABOVE: Thousands of Europeans and its dominions celebrated the declaration of war in 1914

1915. The ANZAC legend is born – forged in the trenches, sand and blood of a place known as Gallipoli.

1916. Patriotism and Nationalism has swept millions of young men into the furnace of steel, mud, and blood that is the Western Front. There is no escape from the snipers, artillery and rats that now infest their lives. They are told by their Generals that they are the best. They must be, because the original armies of 1914 are gone. Massive civilian armies must be raised to finance the ambitions of a group of politicians and royals. Once again, thousands of naïve young men sign up both in Europe and its Empire. From Canada, Africa, and Asia and then from two countries, both less than a decade-old and tucked away in the far south eastern corner of the world, men are sent to serve their country in a faraway land: Australia and New Zealand.

It was in this year that the story of Sergeant (and later R.F.C Captain) Cedric Ernst Howell began; a distant relative of mine.[1]

Cedric Ernst Howell was born in Adelaide 1896, to a father who was an accountant and his mother, Ida Caroline Hasch (1870-1938). The family shifted from quiet Adelaide to bustling Melbourne when Howell was around 10 years old. He attended the Church of England Grammar from 1909-13. At the age of seventeen he left to become a trainee draughtsman. When the 'War to End Wars' began, Howell held a commission in the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Victorian Citizens Force. Resigning in 1915 because he was not yet 21 and unable to assume his rank in active service, he enlisted as a private in the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion Reinforcements.

His Service Number was 5257 and he signed his enlistment papers on January 1<sup>st</sup>. Howell's personal details show that he was 6 feet tall, weighed 70 kilograms, was fair of complexion, and had light brown hair.[2] He may have looked like the typical Australian; he was anything but.

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[1] (see below reference) I am related to Howell through my Great-Great Grandfather (Heinrich Kohlhagen – page 138) on my Grandmother's (Florence Gerlach – page 141) side, who was Howell's Great Uncle. (I am on page 142).

[2] *'The Carpenter, the Shepherd, and the Farmhand – A History of the Kohlhagen Family in Australia: 1846-1983 and beyond...'* accessed 19-9-2011, 'Cedric Ernst Howell, Pioneer Airman' page 247, First Edition published by the Kohlhagen Reunion Committee, 1983, Digital Edition Published 2010 by the Editor. Edited by C.A Kohlhagen B.A.

Howell completed basic training at Broadmeadows Camp, Australia. In March 1916, Howell left comfortable family life in “Myalla”, Eaglemont, Melbourne and set sail for Egypt. Between this time and August, Howell graduated from the Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) School with the rank of Sergeant. In September, he was sent to France.

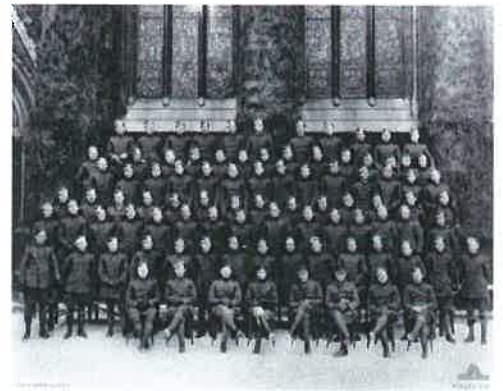
Within a month of the new 46<sup>th</sup> Battalion’s arrival they were pitted into the fight against the Germans in several heavy engagements. The 46<sup>th</sup> were created in Egypt through the experimental ‘doubling programme’, where raw recruits like Howell fought with veterans from the Gallipoli campaign in order to spread experience throughout the armed forces, give the men friendships, and support the idea that if they fought alongside their own countrymen, they would be united and strong in their minds and hearts. The first engagement was at Poizers on August 6-7 where the Battalion fought as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, sustaining over 7,000 casualties.[3] On just one mile of the Front and over 18 days of fighting, the Australians lost over 23,000 men, more than those lost at Gallipoli. Like many of the surviving ‘Diggers’, Howell emerged with little faith in British leadership.



At the next stage of the Allies advance, Moquet Farm, Howell was selected for the role of scout-sniper. During this battle, he would have hidden himself in the mud and picked off German troops as they came, whilst avoiding the hail of death from machine-guns and artillery shells. At the end of the month, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division gained a short respite at a rest area near Yrpes because of its losses.

ABOVE: It was in a trench similar to this that Cedric lived and fought in at Guedencourt

The enormous loss of life occurred without an objective being reached. The Germans had established an elaborate defence on the high



ground. The Australians were forced to endure a ferocious artillery bombardment whilst trying to force their way through to the German’s line, suffering 4,649 casualties.[4]

For around a month, Howell enjoyed a quiet life behind the front line. But it could not last forever. When the Division replenished its numbers with new recruits and healed soldiers, they engaged once more with the Germans at Guedencourt, close to their original objective at Moquet Farm, and continued to fight until the bitter cold of winter, where the advance ground to a halt.

ABOVE: A formal group photo of cadets and instructors of the Royal Flying Corps, Oxford.. Cedric is in the back row on the far left. February, 1917.

[3] and [4] <http://www.ambafrance-au.org/spip.php?article474> accessed 15-9-2011, published by the Office of Australian War Graves, unknown date of last update.

In November, Howell received a surprise. With 200 other servicemen from along the Front, he was removed to England where he joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Flying Officer Cadet Battalion. In a letter[5] dated 26<sup>th</sup> February 1917, Cedric recounted his early experiences in the Flying Corps:

*'I am now a proud 'One-Star-Artist' in the Corps. On the face of it, that is quite a lot, but actually it is nothing. In the first place my commission is only temporary. At present, I am only on the Special Reserve List of Officers in the RFC. When I have proved myself an effective pilot, and receive my 'wings', I become a full officer. However, I am entitled to wear one lone 'pip' on my shoulder straps, and to be called 'sir' by the privates of which I was one only a short time ago.*

*On my first experience, I started off quite well, and went along at great pace for the first one hundred yards, and then all of a sudden the machine swerved to the left, and finished up in a ditch. However, I have become quite an artist in the game and can skim along comfortably at 40-50 miles an hour.'*

Two months later, Howell became a qualified pilot. In another letter[6] home, he described what it was like being a pioneer airman. It had only been 14 years since the Wright Brothers achievements at Kitty-Hawk, and air travel was still relatively new and fraught with danger. The ANZAC quality of bravery was highly evident in Howell.

Howell graduated at Yatesbury, and joined the 45<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the RFC in France, where he acted as a scout and piloted the legendary Sopwith Camels, capable of an incredible 130 miles an hour. After his stint in France, he was moved to the Italian Front[7], where Howell and his Camel duelled with the Austro-Hungarian elite, who were escorting transport columns, high above the Alps. It was here that Howell became an ace. Flying four different Camels before the war's end, he shot down no less than 19 enemy fighters in vicious combat. Cedric's bravery was the same in the air as it was on the ground, and he was awarded three medals: the *Military Cross*, the *Distinguished Flying Cross*, and the *Distinguished Service Order*.

At the end of the war, Cedric stayed on in Britain, where he was promoted to the rank 'Group-Captain' and 'Officer-in-Charge' of Nether-Wallop Airfield, Hampshire. De-mobilised on July 31<sup>st</sup> 1919, Cedric sought a way to go home to



ABOVE: Howell (right) with fellow Australian ace Raymond Brownwell. France

[5] and [6] *'The Carpenter, the Shepherd, and the Farmhand – A History of the Kohlhagen Family in Australia: 1846-1983 and beyond...'* accessed 19-9-2011, 'Cedric Ernst Howell, Pioneer Airman' page 249, First Edition published by the Kohlhagen Reunion Committee, 1983, Digital Edition Published 2010 by the Editor. Edited by C.A Kohlhagen B.A.

(for [6] see Research page 2)

[7] (see above reference) page 251.

Australia and see his family for the first time in three years. He was nominated to participate, on behalf of Martinsyde Aircraft Company, in the England-Australia Air-Race, which hoped to gain publicity for business in Australia.

Cedric and his highly capable navigator-mechanic, Lieutenant George Fraser, set out at 9:45, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919 from Hounslow Aerodrome[9] for their Australian home under the watchful eyes of Prince Albert, Winston Churchill and General Skyes. Tragically, they would never arrive.

Cedric and Fraser were last seen over St. George's Bay near Corfu Island on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1919[10] at twilight. Cedric's body was found washed up the some days later, and the wreckage of the plane a few hundred yards from the shore. Fraser's was never found.

There ended the life of Captain Cedric Howell. He had fought against the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires on the ground and in the air. I could never imagine what he went through; laying on the ground in the filthy mud of France, praying that the cruel knife of fate wouldn't claim him in the dark of night. And flying, flying over the rooftops of houses and seeing the world in which he lived from a view that had for so long defied man – from the air. All in just 22 short years of life!

He died doing what he loved. His desire for adventure, his courage in combat, and sense of duty to his friends, personifies both the romantic and tragic tale that is the ANZAC legend. Nationalism took him to a world at war and it took him out of it. But he left the world that he knew as he entered it – quietly, bravely and selflessly.

I would love to meet him and sit beside him and say: *'Hello, my name's Jordan. I read about you when I was fourteen.'*

Jordan Kuhne

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[9] and [10] *'The Carpenter, the Shepherd, and the Farmhand – A History of the Kohlhagen Family in Australia: 1846-1983 and beyond...'* accessed 19-9-2011, *'Cedric Ernst Howell, Pioneer Airman'* page 255, First Edition published by the Kohlhagen Reunion Committee, 1983, Digital Edition Published 2010 by the Editor. Edited by C.A Kohlhagen B.A.

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*'4<sup>th</sup> Divisions Casualties at Battle of Moquet Farm, 1916'* accessed <http://www.ww1westernfront.gov.au/battlefields/mouquet-farm-1916.html> accessed 15-9-2011, published by the Australian War Memorial, author unknown. Last updated December 2010.

*'4<sup>th</sup> Divisions involvement at Battle of Moquet Farm ww1'* accessed at <http://www.ambafrance-au.org/spip.php?article474> accessed 15-9-2011, published by the Office of Australian War Graves, unknown date of last update. Extracted from: 'A guide to the Memorials of the Western Front, France and Belgium', unknown author, published by the National Library of Australia, 1998.

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*'Cedric Ernst Howell, 1896-1919'* accessed at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/howell-cedric-ernest-6747>, accessed 15-9-2011 published by Australian Birth Dictionary, 1983, author unknown.

**Images sourced from:**

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**Note to Readers:**

As few original pictures or documents about Cedric Ernst Howell remain, I am obliged to quote them. I apologize for any inconvenience.

**Military Awards – Page 252**

**Howell was a brave and devoted to his duty as an officer, and would never forsake his men.**

**AWARDED THE MILITARY CROSS**

*'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He bombed an electrical powerhouse with great skill, obtaining three direct hits from 100 feet. With two other machines he carried out a dashing attack on a formation of twelve enemy airplanes. Although badly hampered by frequent jams on both of his machine guns, he shot down three and drove down one out of control. He is a most successful and gallant patrol leader, and has destroyed six enemy airplanes and shot down one out of control.'*

**Supplement to the *London Gazette*, 16-9-1918**

**AWARDED THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER**

To: Lieut. (T./Capt.) Cedric Ernst Howell, M.C

*'On a recent occasion this officer, leading a patrol of three machines, attacked nine enemy airplanes, destroying six and driving down one out of control; he himself accounted for two of these. On a former occasion he destroyed three enemy airplanes in one fight. He is a fine officer, skilled and determined.'*

**Supplement of the *London Gazette*, 21-9-1918**

**AWARDED THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER**

To: Lieut. (T./Capt.) Cedric Ernest Howell, M.C., D.F.C.

*'This officer recently attacked, in company with one other machine, an enemy formation of fifteen airplanes, and succeeded in destroying four of them and bringing one down out of control. Two days afterwards he destroyed another enemy machine, which fell in our lines, and on the following day he led three machines against sixteen enemy scouts, destroying two of them. Captain Howell is a very gallant and determined fighter, who takes no account of the enemy's superior numbers in his battles.'*

**Supplement to the *London Gazette*, 2-11-1918**



In his letters home, Howell managed to make some laughs even in the time of war.

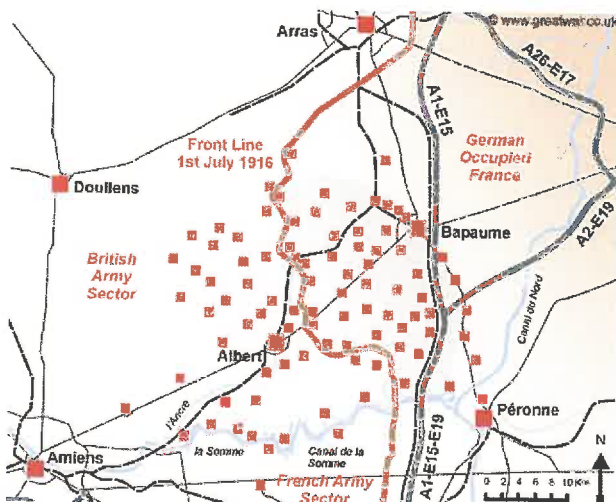
*Yesterday [Sunday] I did my first solo flight – officially known as solo straights; that is starting at one end of the field you taxi along until you have got up flying speed, and rising 15-20 feet off the ground, fly to the other end, and land again.*

*Sounds easy doesn't it, but it is not so easy as one would imagine. The landing is trouble. My great fault was landing too quickly. I started off by landing 50 miles an hour. I have, however, got the knack of it and am doing better. This morning for I went for my solo circuit that is starting off from the aerodrome, I climbed to a height of about 1000 feet and circled around the outside of the aerodrome, flying over houses, trees and fields.*

*When flying over buildings, the machine gets bumped about in all directions-first up and then the other. But it is great, so long as you keep cool, and correct for every bump. Of course the machines we learn on are not like the fighting machines. We can only do 60m.p.h., whereas a really fast "bus" will do from 120 to 130 miles per hour. If it calms down this evening, I will be going for my ticket; this is not my 'wings'-it is merely a preliminary, but in pre-war days, it was considered the thing.*

Written sometime in 1917

Pictures – Howell's War (Tour of Duty, Photographs, etc)



**The Somme**

Notice Bapaume on the right hand side of this map. It was this village that the Allies were attempting to capture, an attempt which Howell took part in.

Accident Inquiry – Page 259

After Howell's tragic death, his father tried to get answers for his questions about the accuracy about the reports which implied that his son drowned.

Mr Brennan in Question Time [Early September]:

*Having regard to the fact that the Commonwealth was interested in the recent competitive aerial flight from England to Australia, I desire to ask the Prime Minister whether the Government have satisfied themselves as to the circumstances of the death of the late Captain Howell and if so, whether they will be good enough to furnish the House with information by the way of a short report, as to the conclusion at which they have arrived with respect to the cause and circumstances of his death.*

Mr Hughes in Reply:

*I understand that we have no information other than that in possession of the Defence Department, but I shall make inquiries on the subject. I have been noting carefully, and with great interest, the doubts cast by the parents of Captain Howell upon the reports as to his death. I think that I have also had a personal letter from the widow of Captain Howell, who came out here. I shall telegraph to the authorities at Home, asking them to supply us with whatever information they have and will make available to the House the reply I receive.*

Mr Brennan in Question Time [Late September]:

*Has the Prime Minister had an opportunity to initiate those inquiries in regard to the late Captain Howell, that he promised to make a week or two ago?*

Mr Hughes in Reply:

*I have made some further inquiries, but I have not received any further information. As soon as I do so I shall not fail to lay it before Honourable Members. I received a letter from the parents, I think, of Captain Howell, supplying me with some information, on which I was able, from what the Honourable Member himself has said, to frame an inquiry. The Honourable Member will understand that it is not very easy to find the person to whom such an inquiry should be addressed, but the Government are doing their best."*

The National Archives in Canberra

**Funeral Article – Page 257-8**

**Howell was a great loss to the people who knew him and cherished him**

*“Several hundred people gathered in the Heidelberg Cemetery yesterday to pay their respects to Captain Howell, D.F.C., D.S.O., M.C., the gallant young Victorian who met his death in fog near Corfu, while making an attempt to fly from England to Australia. At the municipal offices and other building in the town flags were flown at half-mast.*

*The funeral moved from the residence of the dead aviator’s father in Hawdon Street. The coffin was covered with a Union Jack upon which were placed the airman’s service cap, sword, gloves and belt, and was mounted on a gun carriage drawn by six horses.*

*The pall-bearers were Captain A. Cole, M.C., D.F.C., Captain F.W. Lukis, Captain G. Roach-Pierson, Captain H. Rigby, Captain R. Brownwell, M.C., M.M., Captain H. Whittingham, Lieutenant D. Barrington and Lieutenant C. Richards, M.C.*

*There were many beautiful wreaths, including those sent by the Air Force, Military Headquarters, the brother of Captain Howell’s mechanic [who also lost his life], the Old Melburnian Society and the Victorian Council of the Returned Soldiers League.*

*At the graveside, in addition to the deceased’s father and mother, and his young widow, and other relatives, Major J. Lee, represented the Minister for Defence, Captain R. McDonald, the State Commandant, and Mr R.W. Wilmont who represented Brigadier General Grimwade, on behalf of the Old Melburnians, of which Captain Howell was a member. Several of the late airman’s Melbourne Grammar School friends were also present.*

*At the conclusion of the burial service which was read by Rev. S. Buckley of Ivanhoe Church of England, a firing party of 20 members of the R.A.G.A. [Royal Australian Garrison Artillery] fired three volleys and Trumpeter F. Garratt sounded the last post.”*

**Melbourne Age Newspaper on 23 April, 1919**



**Dress Uniform – Page 250**

The photograph on the left may be Cedric Howell pictured in his dress uniform during his basic training with the Royal Flying Corps in 1917. However, some believe it may have been taken while he was in the Melbourne Grammar cadets.



**Late Career – Page 250**

Here, Howell is shown in his flying suit at a later stage of his career – probably early 1918 onwards



**The Italian Front – Page 251**

It was on this front that over a million men died, and where Howell became an ace in dogfights along the Line.



**Lieutenant George Fraser – Page 253**

Howell’s Navigator in the England-Australia Air Race.



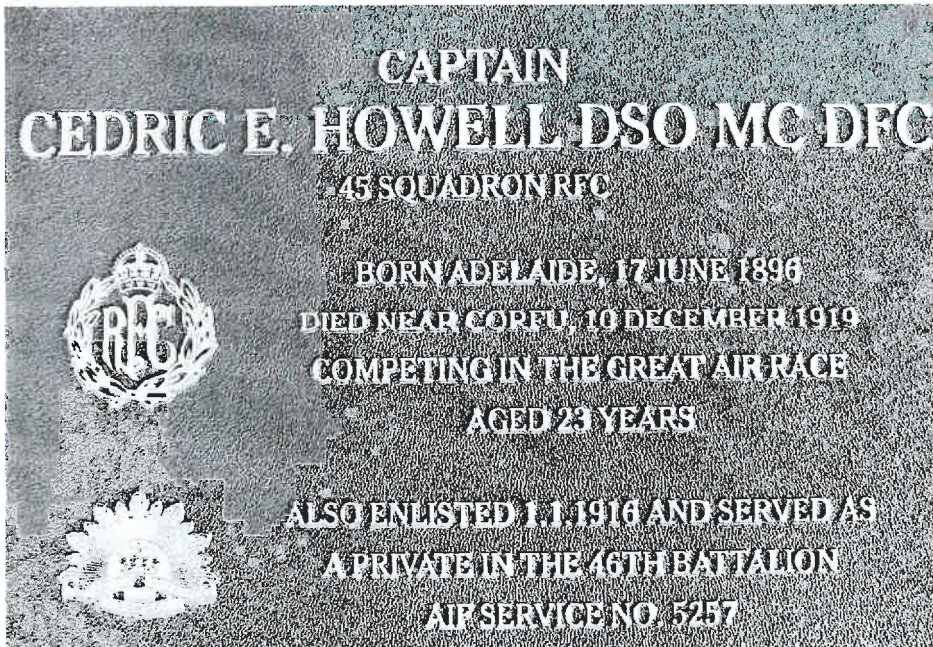
**Howell and Fraser’s ‘bird’ – Page 254:**

Howell and Fraser photographed, above, just before they took off on the first leg of their attempt. They were the fifth and final “official” team to take to the air.



Howell's Remembrance – Page 263

The stained glass window at St Silas's Church in Melbourne, left, and, above, the inscription at the base of the window.



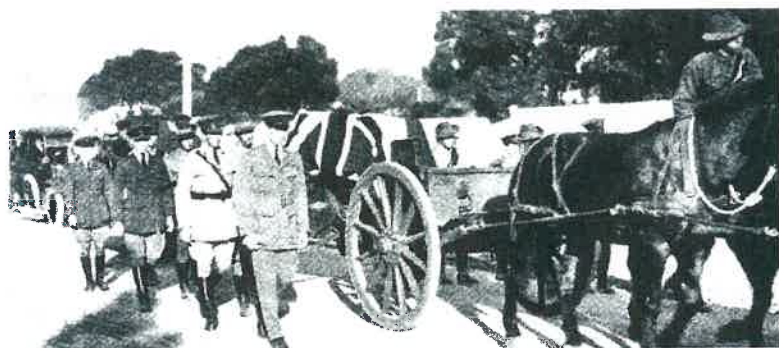
Plaque of Commemoration – Page 263

Commemorative plaque, left, placed on Cedric Howell's grave by the Veteran's Affairs Department.



Left:

Cedric Ernst Howell's final resting place: Corfu Island off the West Coast of Greece. (Located in the top, left-hand corner)



**Farewell to the Pioneer - Page 258**

Captain Cedric Howell's Military Funeral approaching Heidelberg Cemetery where he was interred on Saturday 22 April, 1920

Photograph published in Sea, Land and Air, May 1920.



**Howell's Parents – Page 260**

Cedric Howell's parents taken some years after their son's tragic death.

Photographs supplied by Jeanne Palmer.