



Press Release

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STOW MARIES GREAT WAR AERODROME WELCOMES FAMILY MEMBERS OF ITS HEROIC 1916/17 FLIGHT COMMANDER

After **Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome** opened in 1916 as a Royal Flying Corps base to protect the country from Zeppelin attacks, its first Flight Commander was Captain Claude Alward Ridley – barely 20, but already a decorated war hero.

Claude Ridley's exemplary military career is commemorated in an exhibition at the Accredited Museum, the best-preserved World War One aerodrome in Europe, so it was a huge privilege to welcome his daughter and grandson on site.

Eleanor Longmire, 92, the youngest of Claude Ridley's three children, was joined by her nephew Nick Kitto, son of Capt. Ridley's daughter Elizabeth, along with a number of Mr Kitto's friends and colleagues, including notable military artist Howard Gerrard, who has painted a series of four works commemorating Ridley's wartime service.

It was a return visit to Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome for Eleanor, who now lives in Battersea, and first visited a decade ago when the 23 Grade II* listed buildings on site were still mainly crumbling under overgrown vegetation. "It's incredible how much it has changed," she said, after touring the exhibition halls and admiring the iconic water tower.

For Nick Kitto, a keen photographer, author and retired accountant who has lived in Hong Kong since 1983, it was his first visit to the aerodrome where his grandfather flew multiple sorties against Zeppelin and Gotha bomber raids.

He says: "I started researching the flying exploits of my grandfather in World War One soon after obtaining my Private Pilot's Licence in early 1994 and identified three actions of his of particular note. In order to better record these, I commissioned Howard, who's work I much admire, to produce watercolour paintings of all. Soon after the first three of four paintings had been completed, I became aware of the project to restore Stow Maries to its original operational state. I had been intending to visit and at long last have finally managed to do so. I am extremely impressed and delighted by what has been achieved."

Ian Flint, Chief Executive Officer of Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, comments: "Claude Ridley is one of the heroes of the Royal Flying Corps and we are proud to tell his story at the aerodrome where he led B Flight of 37 Squadron against the Zeppelin menace. To be able to show his daughter and grandson around the buildings that were Capt. Ridley's home was a huge privilege."

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2/... Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome was delighted to receive as a gift from the family, a copy of the fourth painting in the series by Howard Gerrard, showing Claude Ridley in the pre-flight briefing to drop an agent behind enemy lines. The Museum already has copies of the previous three paintings, along with Ridley's graduation sword and other memories of his life and service.

Claude Ridley, who is buried in the churchyard at St Mary and St Margaret's Church near the Aerodrome, was awarded the Military Cross in May 1916 for his conspicuous gallantry and effective performance during Zeppelin raids over Britain. At the time, he was flying with No. 19 Reserve Squadron RFC, when he engaged the Zeppelin L15 which soon afterwards ditched in the North Sea.

Then, in November 1916, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for "conspicuous gallantry and judgement" following a clandestine mission to drop an agent behind enemy lines, during which, after engine failure, he crashed his damaged aircraft to avoid it falling into enemy hands. With assistance from the agent and pretending to be deaf and unable to speak when alone, he was able to escape largely on foot to Dutch territory while at the same time gathering considerable intelligence on German operations.

It was considered too dangerous for him to return to France, so Ridley was promoted from Lieutenant to temporary Captain and took charge of the new RFC base at Stow Maries, where he remained until August 1917 when he moved to the newly formed 61 Squadron at Rochford. He died of illness in 1942, aged just 45, while serving as a Wing Commander in World War Two.

He spent so much time away at war, that Eleanor's memories of him are relatively few: "Much of the time he seemed rather a distant father – I didn't see a lot of my parents, most of my time was spent with my nanny. But I do remember when we lived in Lewes, a really happy memory of walking up the Downs with him, sitting on his shoulders as he told me a story about foxes."

As for Nick, the visit was a fitting and significant addendum to his research on the life of his gallant grandfather, who after the war raced a horse in the Grand National and left money in his will for an annual family dinner at The Dorchester – to include Baked Alaska -- on the anniversary of his safe arrival back in England from his mission behind enemy lines. Nick adds: "Ian and his team are producing something very special at Stow Maries and I much look forward to a return visit soon." Nick has become a Lifetime Member of the Propeller Club that supports the ongoing work at Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome.

Visitors can learn about Claude Ridley and other heroes of the Royal Flying Corps at Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, open Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, 10am to 4pm. For more information visit www.stowmaries.org.uk.

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Please credit all images to Dave Davies/SMGWA. For more information or additional photography contact comms@stowmaries.org.uk

Notes for editors:

- All proceeds from opening to the public and all events directly funds the ongoing work to preserve and protect Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome and support its battle for survival.

- The museum, situated between Chelmsford and Maldon in the Essex countryside, features the largest collection of Royal Flying Corps buildings in the world. It was the base of 37 (Home Defence) Squadron Royal Flying Corps, which was tasked to protect London from raids by German Zeppelin airships and Gotha heavy bombers.
- Essex County and Maldon District Councils led the acquisition of the site for the nation in 2013, following a generous grant from the Heritage Memorial Fund. It was placed in the care of Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, a registered charity.
- Today the museum, still an operational airfield, is supported and maintained by over 100 volunteers. It is open each Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 10am until 4pm.