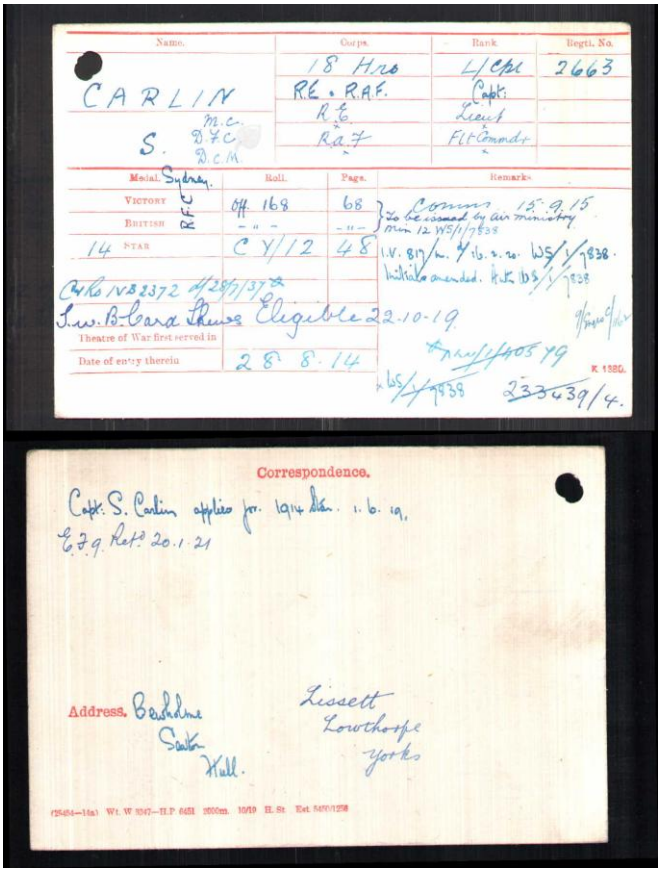
**Death Comes to Wittering - The Life and Times of 'Timbertoes' Carlin – by Simon Wilson**

If I wrote a film script that featured a farmer who went to war in 1914, was decorated three times, met a King and became an air ace despite the loss of a leg, you would probably tell me that it was a bit over the top. If I added that he was an Old Contemptible, survived a mid-air collision and spent time as a prisoner of war you would be howling at the screen. And if, as he sailed away into the sunset in 1919, I told you that there was more to come you would probably think that with a grasp of history like that, I was either an idiot or an American screenwriter. But it's all true.

Sidney Carlin was born in 1889 in Hull. Much would happen in his lifetime, including a change of spelling to Sydney. His father was a dry-salter – a profession that covered many things, usually involving chemicals used in the preserving of food, including salt and colourings.

They lived in a substantial house in Hutt Street, which still stands today, and is big enough to have been converted into six flats. It needed to be large, as the family ran to about a dozen people, and kept two servants. One of the servants caused a stir in the local newspapers when Carlin's father, having missed various sums of money, marked some silver coins, locked them in his bedroom drawer and hid under the bed. The servant, believing the family had all gone out, entered the room, unlocked the drawer and was surprised when Mr Carlin sprang from under the bed to catch her in the act.

In the 1901 Census Sidney is at boarding school in Cumbria. It was a long way, but it was run by a teacher who had formerly run a school near Hull, where Carlin's older brothers had been educated. After school he started an electrical engineering apprenticeship but left to enlist in the 18th Hussars. A year and a half later he borrowed money from his father and bought himself out to go farming.




He rejoined his regiment at the start of the war and his Medal Index Card (MIC) *left*, shows him landing in France on 28 August 1914. This was the first draft of reinforcements, replacing the losses sustained in the opening weeks of the war. There was still plenty of fighting to do, though, and his MIC shows that he qualified for the award of the 1914 Star – the medal of the Old Contemptibles. It also shows he was entitled to the clasp and rosettes, indicated that he had been under fire during that time (or within range of the enemy field artillery). The clasp was worn on the medal ribbon when medals were worn and the rosette was worn on the ribbon when only ribbons were worn. In November 1914 he was appointed Lance Corporal and in January 1915 spent two days in hospital.

The winter of 1914-15 was, to say the least, unpleasant – very wet and with eleven days below freezing. Add poor drainage, dead

Carlin, probably 1918-19

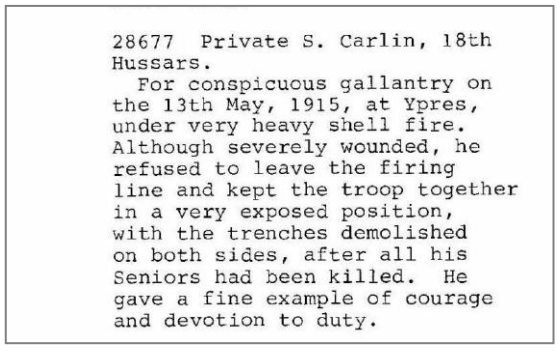
bodies and primitive trench systems and the situation resembles all the stereotypical images we have of the |Great War. It's a wonder that more people didn't end up in hospital.

Carlin next comes to notice in May 1915 when the regiment was subjected to prolonged bombardment during the 2nd Battle of Ypres.

The Regimental War Diary reports:

*In trenches. At 3.30am the enemy opened a very heavy shell fire on the front trenches…Considerable lengths of trenches…were demolished by cross fire from the heavy howitzers…All communication was cut…the Essex Regt came up to occupy the line which was supposed to be abandoned [such was the severity of the attack] but the 18 Hussars were found to be still in possession…during the remainder of the day the remnants of the Regt held…The bombardment of the 18 Hussars trenches was of such intensity that a black pall hung over them for long periods from 3.30am until about 10am, when heavy intermittent shelling continued till dark. The noise was deafening and the place a veritable inferno… [TNA, WO95/1113/1]*

Carlin took a leading part in the defence and, whilst recovering from wounds in hospital, was notified that he had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) for "conspicuous gallantry". While he was recovering from his wounds he was offered a commission in the 1st East Riding Field Company, Royal Engineers, which he accepted. He was soon back in action,



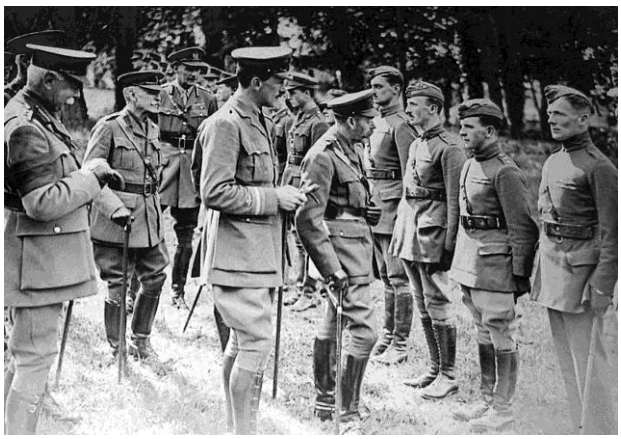
28677 Private S. Carlin, 18th Hussars.
For conspicuous gallantry on the 13th May, 1915, at Ypres, under very heavy shell fire. Although severely wounded, he refused to leave the firing line and kept the troop together in a very exposed position, with the trenches demolished on both sides, after all his Seniors had been killed. He gave a fine example of courage and devotion to duty.

Carlin's D.C.M. Citation

At the Battle of the Somme his unit was involved in the fighting around Longueval and in July 1916 he sustained serious injuries to his left leg. Again, his conduct under fire was recognised, this time with the Military Cross (MC), but the wounds led to the amputation of his leg, and presented him with another challenge. He applied for a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and started to take private flying lessons to show he was capable of flying. It paid off and he transferred to the RFC in August 1917, reaching France for a 3rd time in May 1918, where he joined 74 Squadron to fly the SE5A. Here he found a number of noted air fighters, including "Mick" Mannock, "Grid" Caldwell and "Taffy" Jones, slotting into the nickname culture as "Timbertoes". You would not, of course, get away with a nickname like that these days.

Despite his training, Carlin found landing to be a challenge, and wrote off several aircraft in heavy landings. In exchange he destroyed five enemy aircraft and six observation balloons. In those days balloons were valuable strategic targets, and heavily defended by a variety of weapons, including the infamous "flaming onions", which turned out to be 37mm tracer rounds, when all was revealed after

the war. It took a real hero to tackle a balloon, and that is why the authorities were happy to count them as being of equal importance to an aircraft in victory terms. His efforts resulted in the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), but, such a level of activity brings risk with it . September would be a bad month for him – first a mid-air collision with “Grid” Caldwell, which they both survived, then the air combat where he was shot down and captured.



Carlin, extreme right with stick meeting King George V in France, August 1918

His time as a prisoner of war mirrors the experience of W E Johns, the writer of the Biggles stories, who was also shot down in September 1918 and repatriated in December, though it is unlikely that they met. If they had, I can't help thinking that Carlin would have been added to the mix of characters that made up the fictional Biggles.

Carlin returned to farming in Yorkshire, before emigrating to Kenya. In Yorkshire he came to the attention of the police several times for driving offences and found time to be runner-up in the Kiplingcote Derby – Britain's oldest horse race. It would take an article in itself to talk about the race, a cross country race that has been held every year since 1519. It's a tough race which at one point uses the verge of a public road. There is no doubt it is “our” Carlin, as it is mentioned that he had a wooden leg and had served in the war “with resource and distinction”, but more importantly that the “wooden substitute” was “no bar to good horsemanship”.

Defiant Gunner in GQ Parasuit, specially developed for use in the cramped turret.

He went to Kenya the year after that, where he was active in the Kenya Defence Force and the social life, taking up polo. In 1937, citing his polo as proof of fitness, he was allowed a month's unofficial training with the Royal Tank Corps as part of his plan to serve in the next war. Then, in a move with similarities to a Biggles story, he left east Africa and sailed to the Seychelles, searching for gold and pearls, then into the Pacific before returning to East Africa, and finally the Red Sea (where he was shipwrecked).

In Malta, in 1939, he was commissioned into the anti-aircraft artillery, but applied for a transfer to the RAF, where he was accepted into the RAFVR as an airgunner. Even then, aged 50 (despite tinkering with his birth date), he specified he wanted to fly combat missions, and they agreed.

He trained at the Air Armaments School at Manby, near Louth and was sent south, where he participated in the Battle of Britain as a Defiant gunner with 264 Squadron. The RAF, had decided shortly before the war, that they needed a single-

engined turret fighter to deal with unescorted German bombers. The Defiant was good at that, as its record as a night fighter shows. Unfortunately, there were very few unescorted bombers. The Defiants had some initial success (when the fighters mistook them for Hurricanes and attacked from above and behind, which is just what the turret gunners wanted). However, the Germans learned quickly, realised they had no forward firing guns, and inflicted heavy losses before the Defiants were withdrawn to quieter sectors, in Carlin's case, to Kirton-in-Lindsey.

Boulton Paul Defiants

He unofficially flew on several missions to Germany in a Wellington of 311 (Czech) Squadron, during this period, flown by a friend of his from Kenya days, Percy Pickard. Pickard was the pilot in the film *Target for Tonight,* and after winning three DSOs and a DFC, would be killed in the Amiens prison raid in 1944.

He had been posted to 151 Squadron at Wittering, and on the night of 7 May 1941, returned from a frustrating night patrol (three contacts, but no successful interceptions) to find that Wittering had been bombed by a German intruder.

In the early evening of 8 May, a Junkers Ju 88 came in low, shot up A Flight dispersals and dropped eight bombs.

There are several versions of what happened next. Either, as everyone else took cover, Carlin cycled furiously across the tarmac to get to a Defiant and return fire. Or he ran across. One version even has him in the turret when he was killed. However, another version reports that he was walking across to his aircraft with his pilot, Sgt H E Bodien, when the bombs dropped.

We are now in the area discussed by Andrew in his article *More Sources than Heinz...Just One Patrol in Normandy.* We all know that Carlin was a hero, and it is tempting to accept the most heroic version of the story. However, I've always been a little uneasy with the story of him racing to his gun turret.

I'm open to being corrected, but it seems unlikely, as I've always assumed that the turret wouldn't work without the engine running. Yes, it could be traversed by a hand crank, but I'm not sure that would be quick enough to tackle a fast-moving bomber.

Bodien's version suggests that they both threw themselves on the ground and that Carlin, being a little slower, was caught in the blast of a bomb that fell five yards away - It “blew his arm and side off and smashed in the back of his head”. Well, he was 52 and he had a wooden leg so it's likely he was a little slower than Bodien, who was half his age. The attack destroyed two aircraft and damaged four others. The plane Bodien and Carlin were walking towards was one of the ones destroyed.

By the time he was killed, Carlin had done more than enough to be considered a hero, and it doesn't really matter how he died. However, it's important to look at the evidence and although Bodien was on the floor under his parachute pack, his version is more likely to be the accurate one. It's even possible that as Bodien hit the floor, Carlin turned towards his gun turret, but there was no bike and he wasn't killed in the turret.

I don't want to re-write history or the reputations of great men, but I do try to be reasonably accurate, and Bodien's version seems to be most likely.

By the time anyone reached him, Carlin was already dead, and a legendary story had come to its end. Bodien would go on to destroy six enemy aircraft and fly in another war over Korea. He retired as a Wing Commander with a DSO, DFC and American Air Medal.

Carlin's death was registered in Peterborough the next day and he was cremated in Hull, where his ashes are buried.