



Gordon Percy Olley (1893-1958)

Captain Gordon Olley was a pilot. Whilst we do not know to what extent he flew for Aerofilms – we do not believe he was a direct employee for the firm, but rather acted in his capacity as pilot at Handley Page Transport Ltd – he was the pilot involved in the infamous Southwark Boating Lake Crash in 1920 that saw him and Francis Lewis Wills, one of Aerofilms founders, summoned to court under the Air Navigation Regulations.



The Southwark Boating Lake Crash, March 1920.

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Known as 'G.P.O' (*Flight*, 1958:433), Gordon Percy Olley was born on 29th April 1893 in Harleston, Norfolk. Son of George E. Olley and Eliza Dow and brother to Dora M. (born c.1886 Harleston) and Reginald G. (born c.1888 Harleston) he was working as an Apprentice at a Wholesale Clothing Warehouse at the time of the 1911 Census, the family having moved to 161 Gloucester Road, Bristol some time before the 1901 Census (1901 and 1911 England Census). He was later employed as a motor

salesman at Selfridges in London from 1912 to August 1914 (Air Ministry, AIR 76/380/182).

At the onset of the First World War, Gordon Olley initially enlisted with the Queen Victoria Rifles in August 1914 but after an incident with an irate sergeant he changed to enlist with the Royal Fusiliers. Owing his own motor cycle he was appointed a despatch rider but found the waiting around a bit dull so subsequently applied at the HQ of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) to ask if there was any chance of them taking him on. Fortunately they were short on despatch riders so he was successfully transferred and sent to France being attached to the RFC No 1 Squadron. Once in France he asked for the opportunity to learn to fly and became a corporal observer with the Canadian pilot Lieutenant Dore before returning to the UK to Salisbury Plain to learn to fly and qualify for his wings, taking his first solo flight after only three hours of instruction (Olley, 1934).

Returning to No 1 Squadron as a Sergeant pilot he was drafted home in 1917 to join the company of RFC airmen known as 'ferry pilots' whose task was to fly new planes out from England to the aerodromes in France. He was made an Officer in 1918 and was also the recipient of the Military Medal (*Royal Aeronautical Society News 2012; Supplement to the London Gazette 1917:9610*), a 1915 Star Medal (when a 2nd Air mechanic in the RFC, Regimental No 6313), Victory Medal and British Medal (British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards 1914-20).

After the war Olley joined Handley Page Transport Ltd, flying on the first Continental air services. He was hired as a pilot by Aerofilms Ltd, and was the pilot involved in the infamous Southwark Boating Lake Crash in 1920

that saw him and Francis Lewis Wills, one of Aerofilms founders, summoned to court under the Air Navigation Regulations. This was “for flying over London, and in particular the Bermondsey district, on March 31 in an Avro aeroplane, of which he was pilot, at an altitude which did not enable the aircraft to land outside London by means of propulsion, the engine having failed through a mechanical breakdown. There was also a summons for flying over London at a low altitude dangerous to the public safety.” (*Flight*, 1920:826)

The case had been brought by the Commissioner of Police but it is reported that when it was called no parties were in attendance so no further action was taken.

He also worked for K.L.M. inaugurating the London to Amsterdam route in 1921 before moving to Imperial Airways when it formed in 1924. He started the Silver Wing service from London to Paris in 1927 and remained chief pilot at Imperial until 1934, having been put in charge of a department created to deal exclusively with all individual and special charters of aircraft for long distant flights both in the UK and overseas in 1928. This included flying bullion and big-game hunters all around the world (*Flight*, 1958:433; *The Times*, 1958).

When he left Imperial in 1934 it was to start his own company, Olley Air Services Ltd, principally a charter airline that operated out of Croydon but which also built up services to the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and the Scilly Isles (Royal Aeronautical Society News, 2012) acquiring concerns such as Sir Alan Cobham’s Cobham Air Routes Ltd around 1935/36 (Cobham, 1986:172). It was also in 1934 that he published his autobiography “*A Million Miles in the Air Personal experiences, impressions*

and stories of travel by air, etc". This marked the fact that he was the first pilot to have flown a million miles reaching this milestone in 1931.

It is also said that of the 40,000 passengers he carried there was not one casualty (*Flight*, 1958:433). This is not to say however, that there were not incidents and crashes over his career. He notes in his autobiography that as pilot for Handley Page he had to make 17 forced landings and land in a field rather than at the aerodrome on one occasion as it was getting dark and he could not find it (Olley, 1934). Another incident was recorded in *The Times* in 1925 under the headline 'Airman's Safe Landing'. This reports on how Captain Olley was able to get both his plane and passengers to the scheduled destination of Croydon Airport despite dense fog which was so thick it took the ground staff a long time to locate them after landing. *The Times* described this as 'a feat unprecedented in the history of civil aviation...' (*The Times*, 1925).

Gordon Olley died March 18 1958 at Wimbledon Hospital at the age of 64. His obituary in *The Times* says that he had a 'small, compact figure, quick movements, and trim moustache', and was 'known to thousands of regular air travellers' (*The Times*, 1958). A scholarship in honour of his memory has been set up by his daughter Dr June Olley with the Royal Aeronautical Society. The G.P. Olley Award is aimed at those studying in the field of aviation medicine.

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