

Wilfred Lofts

**2nd Lieutenant, 42 Squadron, Royal Air Force
Formerly Lance-Corporal, 5th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers**



Photograph courtesy: T Collin

Wilfred Lofts was the fourth son of Alfred and Isabel Eliza Lofts, born in 1898. More details about his family can be found in the entry for Bernard Lofts, his older brother, who was also a war casualty, killed in action in 1915.

In the 1901 Census Wilfred was aged 3 and living in the High Street, Rickmansworth, the town where he was born, with his parents, three brothers and three sisters. By the time of the 1911 Census, he was aged 12 and the family was still at the same address, but the two older boys, Frank and Bernard, had left home.

According to the *Bucks Examiner* of 23 August 1918, Wilfred was educated at Watford Grammar School and matriculated at the age of 16.

Watford Grammar School kindly provided the following details:

"WILFRED LOFTS - School no 1048, Date of Birth 29.06.98.
Date of Admission 12 September 1905. Age on entry 7 years 2 months.
Date of leaving 14 December 1915, age 17 years 6 months.
Father: A Lofts, Lyndhurst, Nightingale Road, Rickmansworth."
Wilfred's school report shows him to have been an average pupil.

Wilfred's father ran a grocery and provisions business in Rickmansworth and moved to the Central Stores, Sycamore Road, Amersham, in early 1915. The family was living there in 1918 but later moved to 'Cranford', Chesham Road, Amersham.

Drawing upon the article in the *Bucks Examiner* and combining it with information taken from Wilfred's service record held by the National Archives at AIR 76/305/32 we can reconstruct his career as follows: on leaving school Wilfred joined Lloyds Bank, working in Warwickshire before transferring to Watford. When he enlisted he was at the Chesham Branch of Lloyds. The RAF record states that he had been employed as a bank clerk from 19 Dec 1914 to 19 July 1916. His

brother Bernard was killed in action while he was still working at the bank.

When he was 18 he joined the Public School Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers spending a year with them mainly in Edinburgh. There may be some confusion here as The RAF records note his previous service in the 5th Battalion, while it was the 18th to 22nd Service Battalions which were known as Public School battalions. The 5th battalion was based in the UK for almost the entire war.

Wilfred was seconded to the Flying Corps and was based at St Leonards, Denham and Lincolnshire. While at Denham he gained his commission as 2nd Lieutenant on 2 February 1918. According to the RAF records this became effective on 5 May and was listed in the *London Gazette* of 28 June 1918.



The month of April 1918 began with the consolidation of the separate British Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Services into the Royal Air Force.

Wilfred was injured on 16 May 1918 but was back in France by July flying as a pilot with 42 Squadron RAF.

No. 42 Squadron served during World War I as an army co-operation squadron. It had been formed on 1 April 1916 at Filton and for much of the First World War flew reconnaissance sorties. The squadron had converted from BE2s to RE8s by the time Wilfred went out to France. Known through rhyming slang as the 'Harry Tate' this was a two-seater biplane designed for both reconnaissance and bombing missions and had a top speed of 164km per hour. Inexperienced pilots found it difficult to fly because it could stall without warning. If it crash-landed, it was inclined to burst into flames. Despite that, over 4,000 were built. A full-scale model is on show at the RAF Museum in Hendon.

Co-operating with the army meant flying over enemy positions to gather intelligence and to provide the artillery with information on where their shells were landing so as to improve their accuracy. Not only was flying at that date an inherently dangerous activity but enemy artillery and fighter planes would be doing their utmost to prevent the spotter planes from returning to base to report what they had discovered.

Wilfred Lofts was killed in action in the final months of the war, on 9 August 1918, aged just 20, and buried in grave IV.A.30 in Aire Communal Cemetery, about 9 miles SSE of St Omer.

The article in the *Bucks Examiner* went on to give details of the remaining two sons of Alfred and Eliza Lofts. Frank, who gained a commission in the 4th battalion of the Middlesex Regiment and was entitled to wear the Mons ribbon, was rendered unfit for active service, but continued to serve in the Army, while Norman had joined the Machine Gun Corps and had been captured while attached to the Rifle Brigade. He was still held prisoner when the article was written in August 1918.

Wilfred Lofts is remembered with Honour and is buried in
Aire Communal Cemetery, Pas de Calais (Grave ref. IV.A.30)

He is also remembered on the Roll of Honour in the King's Church, Amersham and in Watford Grammar School.