

“And so ended a Perfect Day”

The short, brave life of George Kendall Lucas (1895-1932)



On March 27, 1918, pilot-in-training Ken Lucas had what he called “*a busy day.*” As part of his instruction at the Royal Naval Air Service’s flight school near Vendôme, France, the 22-year-old law student from Markdale, Ontario was expected to complete a two-hour cross-country flight from the Vendôme aerodrome south to Tours, east along the Loire River to Blois, and home again. The day started well. Ken and two other trainees took off before breakfast,

planning to stick together and be back at “camp” on schedule. Soon, however, Ken was on his own. To maintain altitude, the Air Services’ primitive trainers (“school buses” he called them) had to run at full throttle, but since different machines had different top speeds, formation flying really wasn’t on.

In a letter to his parents written three days later, Ken sent a detailed description of the day’s events, and this breezy account appeared in *The Markdale Standard* on May 2. Including information about the experience of flying – he explains, for example, that bumps caused by air pockets and the “haphazard movements of the ocean of air” are no fun at all – Ken describes being blown off course, realizing he was lost, landing in a cow pasture to ask directions, and being befriended by villagers in tiny Neuillé-Pont-Pierre. Not only did villagers reposition his machine for takeoff and wave him on with cheers, they gave him a bang-up mid-day meal, bringing out the good Sunday red wine.

During his two and a half years overseas, Ken recorded more than 65 stories and observations in a notebook. Entries are often undated, and they vary in length: some are several pages long, others so brief they fit two or three to a page. Each has a title. None seem to have been edited at a later date, with the exception of the Neuillé-Pont-Pierre piece (“A Busy Day”), revised and expanded for the letter to his family.

One of the young men he meets at lunch turns out to be a German prisoner of war who has worked as a farmhand since his capture in 1914:

He seemed quite happy and was treated as one of the family. He was a pleasant, good-natured sort of chap – not the devil incarnate as all Germans are supposed to be. . . . We didn’t discuss the ethics of the war but he said that he was mighty lucky to be out of it.

After lunch, Ken is taken around his hosts' farm and then for a tour of the countryside with a French transport driver. Later, after Air Service mechanics have worked on his machine, he takes off and flies in the general direction of Vendôme:

I flew until sunset and as I did not recognize the country I decided to land again for the night, this time on the outskirts of a fairly large town that looked strange to me in the dusk. I shut off the engine, glided down, landed all right and immediately taxied across the field plumb into a pile of dirt and turned up on my nose as nicely as you please. My feelings as I analyzed them afterwards were those of intense surprise intermingled with disgust at having hit the pile. I had been thrown into my belt, which I immediately unbuckled, and jumped up after having turned the petrol off. I then asked where I was and you can imagine my disgust at learning that I was in Vendome. Crashed, by jove! right on my own doorstep. I did not recognize the town in the dusk when approaching from a new angle. I got a car back to the camp and reported to my Flight Commander.

"And so ended a Perfect Day," his notebook reads. "Got lost – dined with German prisoner – Crashed."

Ken came from a prominent small town Ontario family. His maternal grandfather was Matthew Kendal Richardson, businessman, politician, and child welfare advocate. His father, Isaac Benson Lucas, was a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario for Grey Centre from 1898-1919 and Attorney General from 1914-1919.

Born on June 15, 1895, Ken grew up in Markdale, 150 kilometres north-west of Toronto. In his late teens, he attended Upper Canada College in Toronto, became a member of the active militia, and studied law at Osgoode Hall until his enlistment at 20. He had one sibling, a younger brother, Isaac Brock (“Dick”) Lucas, later a Grey County lawyer and a renowned arborist.

In February 1916, Ken was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Not yet 21, he sailed to England in early April and joined the administrative staff at the Ontario Military Hospital in Orpington, at that time a village on the outskirts of London. Renamed No. 16 Canadian General Hospital, “Orpington” had 2,000 beds at its peak, and by the war’s end had cared for more than 30,000 men from the British Empire. One of its surgeons, Thomas McCrae, was the brother of John McCrae, author of “In Flanders Fields.”

The following March, Ken was promoted to “captain and quartermaster.” By then his notebook held more than 30 stories and observations ranging in tone from frivolous to mundane. Three or four early entries shed light on his role and duties at Orpington. One of them, “Disillusionment,” refers to his responsibility for conducting a hospital inventory: he starts with the nurses’ quarters. Another records his feelings about meetings of the officers’ mess: *“We start off with a clear issue but soon get hopelessly balled up with amendments and amendments to the amendments.”* And the third and fourth entries record his reaction to being appointed “Company Officer”: *I have always had a supreme contempt for the red-tape, brass button end of the army, and here I am . . . chosen to enforce it in this unit.”*

But that’s all he has to say about routine matters. Most of the early entries focus on his personal life: matchmaking for a fellow officer, attending a theatrical

garden party (demonstrating *"how the fox trot really should be done"*), having strawberries and cream at the legendary Trocadero Restaurant, visiting Ireland on the first anniversary of the Easter Rising, and witnessing ragtime music catch on in wartime London. There's a long story about undermining the efforts of another officer (*"a rude man"*) to romance *"the fair Miss Acheson,"* as well as a giddy account of infiltrating a nurses' party *"dressed, perfumed, powdered, and rouged"* as a *"basketball girl,"* and an extended, sharply-observed, and very funny list of his colleagues' names and their obsessions and delusions. The list ends with: *"Myself – That the whole world is aware of and concerning itself with my rather unheroic role in the present war."* For a young man, Ken had a remarkable sense of irony and lack of self-importance.

Gradually, however, the prevailing tone turns serious. An officer at Orpington, shell-shocked after two years at the front, commits suicide. Then: *"Mark Killed While Flying. Collision in air at a height of 1000 feet": "Mark was the first member of our little Markdale gang to be killed."* And: *"Gal. Killed at Passchendaele. Was in Signal Section. Other Details Lacking": "Within a week of Mark's death, the second member of the old Markdale Gang went West. . . . Gal. used to be quite a chum of mine. We used to have many a good time together – but why continue. Cheerio Gal. The best of luck."*

Ken never says why he left the Medical Corps, but in December 1917 he resigned his commission and transferred to the Air Service. Training at the Naval College in Greenwich, he writes that his Christmas holidays – spent with friends from Orpington – were a very happy time: *"We celebrated for an entire week."* On New Year's Eve, however:

As I sit here and write away, I can't help but wonder . . . where and under what circumstances the next New Year's Eve will find me. I certainly hope that it will

be at home. Home certainly seems a pretty fine place these days. The coming year will probably be the most critical in my life. I will probably see and take part in events which will always be with me. Here's hoping that these pending events are going to be with me for a considerable period too. If I get through the next year or eighteen months, I will be Jakaloo.

Epilogue

They can't declare Peace too soon for me.

In "R.N. College, Greenwich," Ken writes that life *"was very similar to that of a Boarding School shortly before some military function – lectures interspersed with many drill periods. The lectures all had a more or less distant bearing on flying. The drill was the ordinary infantry drill slightly rehashed for naval consumption."*

Interestingly, he notes that at least half the trainees were Canadian, and not shy about it:

Instructor at Greenwich. (after having taken the names of a new draft of Canadians)

- *Ah! yes! – you are all Colonials then.*
- *Canadian (jumping up) – No Sir – we are all Canadians.*

Training took place on weekdays only; weekends he spent at Orpington. Around this time – early 1918 – he wrote the following in an entry entitled "More Deaths": *"I started my career in the army two years, three days ago tonight. There were nine of us in our room. Four of these are now dead. I have lost track of the other four."*

From Greenwich, Ken went to Vendôme for advanced flight training. The British Flying School, he wrote, provided a no-nonsense orientation to the realities of military aviation and the rickety, fallible machines the pilots were allocated: *“‘Crashes’ are not treated seriously. Only one crash in every dozen results in a hospital case. There has been one fatal crash, four hospital crashes and fifty-some inconsequential crashes during my time here.”*

Assigned to Air Service seaplanes, he trained at Lee-on-the-Solent, a naval air base on the south coast of England. On March 1, 1918 he soloed, and in “A Few Random Remarks,” written around this time, he noted:

Flying is a very misunderstood art. It possesses very few of the pleasant sensations attributed to it and a lot of darned unpleasant sensations. . . . The newspapers are full of special articles by “pilots” who have never flown about “the cavalry of the air”, “our supermen”, “the freedom of the blue”, etc. It’s all bunkum, merely an advertising dodge. I crashed a seaplane at Lee – didn’t flatten out soon enough. We turned up on our nose, so I climbed out on the top of the wing and waited for the rescue party. Nobody was very peeved, just a little nervous lest I should get the “wind up”. I wasn’t hurt and was flying again the next morning.

On April 1, 1918, the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service merged and formed the Royal Air Force, with Ken holding the rank of RAF flight-lieutenant for the rest of his service.

On June 15, 1918, his 23rd birthday, he left England by boat and train for southern Italy and the Adriatic Campaign. Notebook entries focus on daytime reconnaissance patrols, sleep-robbing nighttime air raids, and enemy sabotage. Above all, they tally comrades killed, wounded, or missing in action: “Bragg

and Linden Missing," "Oakley and Rating Killed," "Redfern Wounded," "Corkery and My Observer Killed," "Hodgkin & Pickett Killed."

The war came to an end several months later, but before coming home Ken attended Oxford for a year. Joan, his younger daughter, writes that part of his transition from military service to civilian life involved a "bespoke tailors" on London's Jermyn Street.

Back in Toronto, Ken finished his law studies, was called to the Ontario Bar, and joined the firm of Bain, Bicknell, White, and Bristol. Joan says that Ken hadn't wanted a career in law but complied with his father's wishes, and she wonders what he'd rather have been: "a civilian pilot . . . a writer . . . a singer?"

"His rendition of 'Mother Machree,' delivered while standing with his hand on his heart on a crowded Toronto streetcar – a fiendish requirement of his fraternity initiation – was warmly applauded by the other passengers, some of whom called for an encore."

In 1926, at the age 30, he married 19-year-old Greta Hunter:

"Ken and our mother didn't simply get married – they eloped, crossing state lines until they found in Washington, DC a jurisdiction that asked no awkward questions about age and parental consent. Why they eloped is a mystery to this day."

Their older daughter, Betty Jane, writes that Greta had attended art school in the "Roaring Twenties" and, vivacious and popular, had been crowned "the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi" at the University of Toronto. After their wedding, Ken and Greta bought a large home at 102 Spadina Road in Toronto. Their first son, Brock, was born a year later, then Betty Jane in 1929:

By the time my mother was 25, she had given birth to two more children, so now, by the time I was three and a half, there were Brock, aged five, myself, Joan, almost two, and newborn Michael. Our house held us all comfortably, but our mother required help with such a large brood, and she found that help in Helga, a Finnish girl, who had me speaking my first words in her language. I think we were a very happy and comfortably-off family in those days, although the Great Depression had arrived a few years earlier. We had our home, live-in help, a 1928 Ford Tin Lizzie with a rumble seat and fenders wide enough for a child to stand on and go for a short drive while hanging on for dear life, and an island in Georgian Bay near Pointe au Baril for vacations.

Recently, Joan told historian John Butler that Brock alone had memories of their father, “and only two at that”:

The first had to do with his going on a day-long fishing trip in Georgian Bay with Ken and an indigenous guide, Brock proudly bearing his first rod. At some point they pulled up on a spit of land, collected branches and twigs, built a fire and cooked the catch.

Brock’s other memory involves a sort of ritual. On coming home from work, Ken would fetch himself a beer and settle down at a table to read a newspaper. Brock, in synch, would fetch his christening mug and a book that contained rather more pictures than words. Armed with these, he would crawl under the table and the two of them would read in comradely silence. After a while, Ken would reach down and pour a bit of beer into the christening mug.

Brock passed on these memories to me not long before he died a few years ago.



Brock, Greta, Betty Jane, and Ken, 1930



Ken and Betty Jane, summer 1932

In early September 1932, however, it all went to pieces. Betty Jane writes:

It was Labour Day weekend, and we had all, including my grandmother and the newest baby, two-month-old Michael, been up at Pointe au Baril with the intention of returning to Toronto by train at the end of the weekend. The lovely weather prompted one last motorboat ride. . . . Greta and Ken took five-year-old Brock and me, aged three, with them. The story is that I sat on Brock, who was lying on a seat, and he rightfully pushed me off him and somehow I ended up overboard. Ken dove into the water to rescue me, but it seems it wasn't so easy and he had a hard time locating me.

Based on press clippings, it seems that Betty Jane sank out of sight, but her father, a strong swimmer, dove deeply, found her hand, pulled her to the surface, and passed her to other boaters who'd raced over to help. Distracted by the little girl's rescue, no one noticed that Ken was gone.

Several days later, his body was recovered and buried in Markdale after a service at St. Paul's Anglican Church in Toronto. Later, his father had a plaque installed at St. Paul's in memory of his son. The inscription ends with St. Matthew: "He saved others, Himself He cannot save."

IN
LOVING MEMORY OF
GEORGE KENDAL
LUCAS

SOMETIME FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT IN THE ROYAL NAVAL AIR FORCE · BARRISTER-AT-LAW OF OSGOODE HALL TORONTO · WHO GAVE HIS LIFE TO SAVE HIS CHILD FROM DROWNING AT POINTE AU BARIL GEORGIAN BAY ON 5TH SEPTEMBER 1932 IN THE 37TH YEAR OF HIS AGE · THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED BY HIS FATHER HON · I · B · LUCAS K · C · FORMERLY ATTORNEY-GENERAL OF THIS PROVINCE

† "He saved others. Himself
He cannot save." St-Matt 27-42 †

Afterword

On November 17, 2018, residents of Grey County, Ontario held a “First Annual Peace Lunch” to recognize both the hundredth anniversary of the Armistice and the absolute necessity of international harmony. A key part of the event was John Butler’s commemoration of Ken Lucas, native son and local hero. In his remarks, John praised the hospitality of the villagers Ken met in 1918 and “the shared humanity” described in the young flyer’s notebook. In concluding, he proposed a toast “to the people of Neuillé-Pont-Pierre, to Ken Lucas, and to peace.”

Grey County is seeking a closer relationship with the French village that welcomed a nonchalant young pilot from Markdale.

Ken lived and died a long time ago, but his story and outlook matter. Fortunately, his notebook gives us a sense of what he was like, how he saw things, and how he changed during his service. Thanks in particular to “a Perfect Day” -- a tale of take-offs, unscheduled landings, lunch with French farmers and a German prisoner of war, as well as rural sight-seeing, navigational confusion, and a final crash -- we see that he lived openly, intelligently, in good humour, and to the fullest extent possible. It was in his character. 

from Ken Lucas's notebook, August 1918

FORCED LANDING AT SEA

Rescued by Destroyer and landed at Brindisi

A raid on Durazzo¹ was scheduled to take place on the morning of August 7th. The D.H.s² were to do the actual bombing and were to be escorted by some Camels and two Short seaplanes. I was appointed pilot of one of the seaplanes. My duty was to pick up the occupants of any of the land machines should they be obliged to alight in the sea. The seaplanes were to start early on account of their slowness, proceed to the mouth of the Durazzo harbor, stay there five minutes and then beat it for home in the trail of the land machines.

According to the prearranged timetable, I left the water at 5:30 a.m. Everything went along merrily until we were nicely in the middle of the Adriatic, when the Observer started handing me notes back re the heat of the water. I soon discovered that we were in for trouble. The revs started to drop and we commenced losing height. I had sighted some Destroyers about ten miles away and had veered off in their direction at the first signs of trouble, consequently when I was absolutely obliged to shut off the engine, I was able to make a landing quite near them.

Upon landing, we immediately signalled the other machine to carry on, asked the Destroyer to pick us up and loosed a pigeon with a message.³ I went on board the Destroyer because I was beginning to feel a bit sea-sick in the heavy swell, while St. John stayed with the seaplane. He was an old sailor and thought he could stand any amount of rocking around. I reported to the Captain of the Destroyer, who said that he would tow us to Brindisi. I then went below to partake of another breakfast.

When I arrived on deck again, I was handed a signal from St. John saying that he couldn't stand the sea and besides he was sick. I could see that she was getting pulled and wrenched about considerably and as I knew we wouldn't get any thanks for towing the machine back, I recommended the Captain destroy her. After some hesitation he agreed to do this.

We wanted to save some of the gear before sinking the machine so we had her pulled up alongside and a demolition party sent aboard. The way in which that party went to work proves that the British Navy still retains the taint of the buccaneering days of long ago. St. John and I were on board over-seeing the work. They broke off, sawed off and pulled off everything detachable. Up went dash-board instruments, wireless gear, pails of petrol, half the propeller, signalling apparatus etc., etc. However – upon returning to the ship, instead of a huge heap of miscellaneous articles lying on the deck, there was only part of our wireless gear visible. Everything else had disappeared as souvenirs. It took considerable persuasion at Brindisi to coax the more valuable part of our gear out of the various hiding places. The machine gun for instance was recovered from beneath the floor of the First Lieutenant's cabin.

After we had abandoned the remains of our old Short, the Captain thought that this would be a grand opportunity for a little target practice. Consequently we drew off a bit and cleared the decks for action. The preliminary preparation being completed, the firing began. The first shots missed the mark by a hundred yards and even those that did eventually hit merely tore large holes in the canvas. Our target practice was the occasion for much ironical cheering from the Australian Destroyer that had stood by to see the fun.

The Captain, nettled by the attention of our Australian friends, decided to turn heavier guns on poor old Short and blow the ___thing out of the water. He'd show them. This was accordingly done but with the same results.

The Australians were now giving us advice on "how to sink a seaplane". Our Captain now sent out his redoubtable wrecking party in a small boat with orders to fire the machine. After much promiscuous pouring of petrol about, the conflagration was finally started and finally consumed all the canvas on one wing. Wild cheers from Australia. The wrecking gang, after being properly slanged as befitting the occasion, were provided with axes and hatchets to chop her in pieces if necessary. This they did in a truly professional manner, but still she floated – upside down. The Captain, now thoroughly out of patience, drew the ship off about half a mile and amid the hat waving and cheers from Australia, rammed old man Short at full speed. This was too much, and with a last saucy flip of her toes she gurglingly gave up the ghost.

The rest of our journey was comparatively quiet. We knocked around Brindisi for a night and a day before we were sent for. As I expected, nothing was said about the loss of the machine. I reported to Col. Oliver on my return, and the following conversation took place:

"Ah, you're back, Lucas."

"Yes, Sir."

"Have a good time?"

"Not so bad, Sir."

"Did you bring St. John with you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Has he had supper?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, go get him and ask him to play a stag.⁴"

"Yes, sir."

P.S. Upon describing the engine symptoms to the engineer, he said that one of the cylinders cracked. The fault, it appears, is fairly common in Sunbeam engines.



endnotes:

¹ Durazzo (Durrës in Albanian) is an Adriatic port in Albania. At this stage of the war, most of Albania was occupied by Austro-Hungarian forces.

² De Havilland biplanes.

³ Homing pigeons are bred to find their way back to base, often over long distances and bearing messages. Ken and his observer would have been trained in their use and how to “loose” them. One notable First World War pigeon, *Cher Ami*, was credited with saving the lives of almost 200 American soldiers surrounded and under fire. Though repeatedly and grotesquely wounded, *Cher Ami* succeeded in reaching home and was awarded the French Croix de Guerre. What would Ken have made of that?

⁴ As Joan Harcourt suggested, “stag” is military slang for sentry duty. “Stagging on” or “doing stag” comes from “standing guard.”

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