

Memories of pilot William Rowland Ding



William Rowland Ding's flying achievements made him a hero to many in Leeds

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The BBC's World War One at Home project launches on air next week, revealing 1,400 stories about the local impact of the conflict. Ahead of a broadcast on *Look North* and *Radio Leeds*, senior operator Matthew Ridley shares his late grandfather's memories of a flying ace's fateful end.

I was very close to my maternal grandfather, Eric Sudell. A well-read articulate man, he fascinated me with anecdotes from his life as both a professional musician and classics teacher.

On his 99th birthday, three weeks before his death, he received a letter from a man he had never met.

The writer of the letter was an airline pilot based in Hong Kong, the grandson of William Rowland Ding, who was a pioneer from the early days of aviation, and became my grandfather's childhood hero.

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Ding was a very brave man and faced great risk every time he flew"

Matthew RidleyLook North operator

Ding was a chief test pilot at Blackburn's aircraft factory in Yorkshire and he was a familiar sight in the skies above north Leeds, his private monoplane emblazoned with his name - DING - in big letters underneath the wings.

"Look out! Ding's up again!" and "more Dinging" were popular shouts heard from the suburban streets and back gardens, particularly on summer days.

Unsurprisingly Rowland Ding was a hero to all the local children, my grandfather included.

Every day after school they would be up at the Soldiers Field in Leed's Roundhay Park, crowding round the cockpit: "Will you take me up with you Mr. Ding?"

"Perhaps when you're a bit older," Ding would reply.

Magnificent man in flying machine

He had flown more types of aircraft than any other British airman at that time and had established a flying school at Windermere in the Lake District, where the more adventurous and wealthy could pay the considerable sum of £75 for a course of flying lessons.

It's difficult to look back from our world of the modern jet and appreciate that, in 1917, Ding was operating at the cutting edge of technology. The First World War was driving aircraft production forward as factories across the country were turned over to the war effort.



As a child, Eric Sudell (above) was a fan of William Rowland Ding

Ding would test the latest models from Soldiers Field. On a Saturday in May 1917, the surrounding park was teeming with people, many presumably to enjoy the warmth of a pleasant summer's evening, but many more to watch the spectacle of this particularly magnificent man in his flying machine.

The accounts of those present tell us that Ding's flight began normally, with him taking the government-designed B.E. 2c biplane up and out away from the crowds - a precaution he was always careful to observe.

On this occasion my grandfather was about a mile away, playing in the street near his house with his friend Alex. They stopped to watch as Ding began a routine that later some would argue was unnecessary for the testing of that plane.

Undoubtedly Ding was a very brave man and faced great risk every time he flew in machines made largely of wood and canvas. He was also by nature a showman and would have been well aware of the crowd watching below. Perhaps with this in mind he decided to fly the plane in a loop.

As my granddad and his friend watched, Ding successfully completed a first loop and began another, the note of the engine deepening as the plane climbed vertically.

Granddad later recalled: "When he got to the top the wing broke away and down he went."

Alex climbed on the wall to get a better look, but a neighbour, who worked for Blackburn's, was walking past and confirmed that he had disappeared out of view.

In the spotlight again

A mile up the road, the scene was one of chaos as bystanders managed to pull Ding, who had died on impact, from the burning wreckage and save his body from being consumed by flames.



Eric Suddell received a letter on his 99th birthday from Ding's grandson

By chance, the copse of trees into which his plane fell has survived, although these days it is surrounded by two housing estates. The house to which his body was removed also still stands but it is difficult to conjure up the twisted wreckage and flames among what is now just a quiet suburban development.

The day after the crash, my grandfather went up to the site and saw the broken wing lying in the road and the plane with its nose buried among the trees, tail pointing skyward.

There was nothing morbid in him and his friends collecting pieces from the plane - they simply wanted something to remember their hero by. For years afterwards, Granddad kept a piece of canvas from the cockpit and tappets from the engine in a tin box.

BBC colleagues who were working on World War One at Home project approached me about this story, and I was happy to share the memories of my grandfather, who died in 2008.

I know they found making the story a challenge with little audio or film available, but the team were helped enormously by Elvington Air museum near York, who kindly fired up the engines of a replica First World War plane.

I know airplane enthusiasts might not strictly approve, but I do know that my grandfather would have been thrilled that the life of this remarkable man who made Yorkshire his home is once more in the spotlight, a hundred years later.

- *Flying Ace* - *William Ding*, Radio Leeds, Wednesday 26 February, 8.15am and Look North Yorkshire, Thursday 27 February, 6.30pm