



## Absent Parachute

by Melanie Winterton

2012-05-06 19:31:41

Material culture studies brings to the fore all sorts of relations and associations between people and things that go beyond the actual form and function of the object (Miller and Tilley 1995), including, for example, actions, sensations, memories, together with feelings and emotions.

Sometimes, however, it is an object's *absence* that can contribute to the story by focusing our attention on other realities as the trajectory of 'materialities' (Buchli 2002; Miller 2005), or 'immaterialities' reveals itself to tell a wider story. For instance, during the First World War, both Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service pilots and observers flew airplanes without carrying parachutes that would enable them to bail out in an emergency in an attempt to save their lives. Observers in balloons, on the other hand, *were* supplied with parachutes, which were fitted to hang outside the basket because they were very bulky. But such parachutes would not fit into the cramped cockpits of First World War airplanes. Their High Command simply refused to provide pilots with parachutes and the absence of such an object became a focus point that is still widely debated today.

Parachutes were discussed at the Royal Aircraft Factory, particularly Calthrop's 'Guardian Angel' (AIR 1/1121/204/5/2073) and tests were successfully carried out on the Calthrop parachute in 1917 (AIR 5/1348). Parachutes were also used to drop agents behind enemy lines (AIR 2/181) but there was no British order for free-fall parachutes until September 1918 (by this time the RFC and RNAC had combined to form the Royal Air Force). Parachutes were simply not adopted by the British army for airplane pilots and their observers although every effort was made to improve the design of the airplanes themselves under the urgency of war; indeed the 'BE' range of airplanes stood for 'Bleriot Experimental' - the pilots were flying *experimental* planes

First World War airplanes were made of wood and doped fabric and were, therefore, exceptionally flammable. From reading pilots' diaries, letters, and books, it is clear that the absence of a parachute caused considerable consternation. Such texts are examples of material culture themselves for they represent a dimension of human creativity integral to the social production of reality (Moreland 2001: 83). Pilots wrote about their 'truths?', their writings representing the 'authority' of their direct experiences (Winter 2006: 113). Such writings tell us of personal feelings and are very emotional. Since emotions are cultural (Tarlow 2000: 728), they are predisposed to archaeological study for they are 'historically specific and experientially embodied' (*ibid*: 713) and, therefore, provide a significant means of enriching archaeological interpretation within the sub-discipline of 'modern conflict archaeology' (Saunders In Press).

Arthur Gould Lee, a pilot during the First World War, makes his feelings very clear. The supply of parachutes would not only ensure that 'every pilot would sacrifice a little performance to have a chance to escape from break-ups and flammers' but would also be a 'great boost for morale' (1969: 57). The reality of not having a parachute was described by Gould Lee: 'What a way to die, to be sizzled alive or to jump and fall thousands of feet. I wonder if you are conscious all the way down' I'd much prefer a bullet through the head and have done with it' (*ibid*: 93).

Pilots dreaded dying in a flaming airplane and pilot, Mick Mannock, after witnessing one of his victims going down in flames, wrote in his diary: 'It was a horrible sight and made me feel sick' (Jones 1937: 149). Mannock was known to carry his service revolver with him whilst flying as he would prefer to shoot himself rather than die in a flaming airplane. Mick Mannock died in a flaming airplane on 20 July 1917 although it is not known whether he managed to shoot himself. (See <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205125198> for photo of Edward 'Mick' Mannock.)

Gould Lee describes how a friend of his died in a plane whose wings suddenly folded back, one after the other, causing the plane to dive vertically:

3 January 1918 'They could see him struggling to get clear of his harness, then half standing up. They said it was horrible to watch him trying to decide whether to jump. He didn't and the machine and he were smashed to nothingness. ' God imagine his last moments, seeing the ground rush up at him, knowing he was a dead man, unable to move, unable to do anything but wait for it. A parachute could have saved him, there's no doubt about that. What the hell is wrong with those callous dolts at home that they won't give them to us?' (Gould Lee 1969: 293).

Modern conflict archaeology provides for a very individual and emotional archaeology and by reading the words of pilots like Mick Mannock and Arthur Gould Lee, our trespassing of their thoughts provides a means that ensures that we will not forget them.

## **Bibliography**

AIR 1/1121/204/5/2073 (1 December 1916 ' 2 February 1918) Reports on 'Guardian Angel' type of parachute.

AIR 1/148/15/84 Parachutes invented by Messrs C.G. Spencer Bros and Mr. E.R. Calthrop.

AIR 2/181 (1918) Notes on the use of Parachutes for Dropping Agents.

AIR 5/1348 (1917) Tests of E.R. Calthrop's 'Guardian Angel' parachute, Type A.

Buchli, V. (ed.) (2002) *The material culture reader* (Oxford: Berg).

Gould Lee, A. (1969) *No Parachute. The Exploits of a Fighter Pilot in the First World War* (London: Arrow Books Ltd).

Jones, I. (ed. (1934) *King of Air Fighters. Biography of Major Mick Mannock VC, DSO, MC* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd).

Miller, D. (ed.) (2005) *Materialities* (Durham and London: Duke University Press).

Miller, D. and C. Tilley (1996) Editorial. *Journal of Material Culture* 1: 5?14.

Moreland, J. (2001) *Archaeology of Text*(London: Gerald Duckworth).

Saunders N.J. (ed.) (In Press) *Beyond the Dead Horizon. Studies in Modern Conflict Archaeology* (Oxbow).

Tarlow, S. (2000) Emotion in Archaeology, *Current Anthropology* 41(5): 713-746.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/317404>. Consulted 22/04/2012.

Winter, J. (2006) *Remembering War. The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven (CT) and London: Yale University Press).

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)