

# **GEOFFREY SULMAN**

**Address at Anzac Day event, Hazelbrook, 2015**

**David Carment**



**Geoffrey Sulman in 1916**

Thank you for the invitation to be here today and speak about my great uncle Geoffrey Sulman, one of many Blue Mountains men who died during the First World War. As a professional historian I am very aware of the different ways in which Anzac Day is viewed but even those who are critical of it acknowledge that for most Australians it provides an occasion in which communities across the country like Hazelbrook can reflect on Australia's role in war and remember those hundreds of thousands of men and women who participated. For many ex servicemen and women it has long been a day on which they recall their own experiences. For numerous others, like myself, it is a time when we think about our own family members who went to war, particularly those who lost their lives. This Anzac Day is, of course, especially significant because it also commemorates the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign, which did much to contribute to our sense of national identity.

I never knew Geoffrey Sulman. He was, however, much spoken about by members of my mother's family during my childhood. I learned from his brother and my grandfather Tom Sulman, with whom he was very close, of his many qualities, most notably his mechanical expertise and his good humour. He was clearly much loved. My great grandmother never fully recovered from his death. A memorial album that she carefully assembled about him is now in Sydney's Mitchell Library as are numerous letters he wrote to his family. Most of the letters were recently digitised as part of a major State Library of New South Wales project. It would be wrong to claim that Geoffrey had any real influence beyond his family or predict what he might have done had he not been killed but, as is the case with so many other Australians who died in the First World War, we need to remember him and appreciate the sacrifice he made.

Geoffrey was born in Mittagong on 11 April 1894, the eldest son of the prominent English born architect John (later Sir John) Sulman and his second wife Annie (later Lady Sulman). He had a half brother, Arthur, and two half sisters, Florence (known as Florrie) and Edith (known as Edie), from his father's first marriage and two brothers, Thomas (known as Tom) and John (known as Jack), and a sister, Joan. Despite his father's very busy professional life, the family was close. When Geoffrey was young he demonstrated abilities in scientific subjects and made mechanical models. His first 15 years were mainly spent in Sydney.

He suffered, however, from serious digestive problems that prevented regular school attendance. Together with his mother's rheumatism, Geoffrey's poor health persuaded John Sulman to move his second family to the Blue Mountains, where he felt the climate was much better. In October 1909 they established their home at Kihilla in Lawson, which still stands largely unchanged today. While the Sulmans also had a house in Sydney, Kihilla was where Geoffrey, Tom, Jack and Joan mainly lived with servants and other staff. John and Annie were also frequently in residence. Tom later wrote of Kihilla as 'an old mansion with verandahs all around it, big high ceilinged-rooms, standing in 22 acres of land a mile out of Lawson. There were stables, coach houses and several outbuildings, a large orchard and bushland – a kid's paradise'. Geoffrey and Tom shared a tutor at Kihilla until Tom went to Woodford Academy in 1912. Geoffrey loved building model aeroplanes and steam engines in his Kihilla workshop and was fascinated by motor vehicles. When John acquired his first car in 1912, Geoffrey was the driver. On one occasion he and Tom secretly built a full-sized

glider, which crashed and disintegrated with Tom as its pilot. Luckily he escaped with only a few bruises.

Unable because of his health to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force after the outbreak of war in 1914 and unsuccessful in his attempts to work in the munitions industry, as an unmatriculated student Geoffrey attended Engineering classes at The University of Sydney but was often at Kihilla until March 1916 when, accompanied by Florrie, he left for England. Both were keen to play a part there in the war. They arrived in London the following month.

Geoffrey looked for war related employment and was pleased when he got a mechanic's job at Thornycroft's Motor Works in Basingstoke. He worked with new lorries that were to be used in the armed forces. He and Florrie also purchased a motorbike and sidecar. Florrie was a volunteer in hospitals and with charitable organisations.

In August 1916 Geoffrey wrote to his parents saying that he intended to join the Royal Flying Corps, the predecessor of today's Royal Air Force. Perhaps surprisingly, he passed the medical examination. In a September 1916 letter to Annie Sulman, Florrie wrote that, 'I really believe that Geoffrey feels it is his duty to enlist, and to take the risks that he knows it means and we shall have to join that host of watchers who work and wait and ever hope for the best for "our unit" in this great fight for right'. Geoffrey started training as an officer cadet at Denham in October, noting that there were other Australians in his hut. He later moved to Oxford.

In March 1917 Geoffrey was appointed a Second Lieutenant. Told that we was to do further training as an observer rather than a pilot, he successfully protested about this and in the same month commenced his pilot's preparation at Vendome in France. Shortly after arriving there he wrote to Florrie that, 'Today I went up for the first time and it was just great...I had control for part of the time, much to my delight...You asked me to tell you what the first go was like, I am dashed if I can tell you, except that it was absolutely "Bonzer". It's well worth travelling half round the world for'. He also enjoyed France, writing, 'My word you don't know how I love this big open country after stuffy little England, it's almost like home with the long coarse dry grass everywhere'. In a further letter from Vendome during April, he proudly told his parents that he was now flying solo. He moved back to England at the end of the month, first to Wye and then to Waddington. Now a fully qualified pilot, he was doing cross-country flights and established a height record for his squadron. In a June letter to Arthur Sulman and his wife Anne, he mentioned that, 'I believe I am not going to be sent out to France immediately, but am about to do a couple of months instructing'.

On 16 June 1917 Geoffrey was instructing a trainee officer pilot in landings. Both pilots could control the aircraft they were flying, with Geoffrey sitting at its front. In attempting a steep turn, the machine fell forward and spun to the ground. Royal Flying Corps pilots at this time were not issued with parachutes so neither of the aircraft's occupants could safely jump from it. Geoffrey was rushed to a hospital in Lincoln but never recovered from his severe injuries. He died on 20 June. The trainee pilot survived. At Geoffrey's own wish, his body was cremated. His military funeral took place at Lincoln on 25 June. The coffin containing his ashes was placed on a

trailer attached to a lorry. The men of his squadron led the procession to St Nicholas churchyard followed by the band, the coffin, two carriages for Florrie and Geoffrey's English relations, and about one hundred Royal Flying Corps officers. In a letter of 26 June, Florrie observed that, 'The beauty and peace of this last week have been beyond all understanding, and I do truly feel that a Higher Power has been near'. In a letter to her father of early July she wrote that she could remember Geoffrey 'saying he could fly as well as most of them although he might not seem so quick and smart. He had developed into a man after your own heart Dad.' She obviously had, however, growing doubts about whether Geoffrey's death and those of others had been in vain. She wrote to Annie Sulman in mid July that 'there are many too suffering with us; and is the World going to be any better for all this pain?'

Geoffrey's grieving parents in Australia were determined to preserve his memory. In 1918 they established the annual Geoffrey Sulman Memorial Prize at The University of Sydney for an essay or thesis on Aeronautics. In 1933 they endowed at the university the Geoffrey Sulman Memorial Lectureship for the advancement of the study of Aeronautics. Here in the Blue Mountains the Honour Gardens at Lawson, which John initially designed and helped create in 1918 and 1919, were partly a labour of love for Geoffrey. As chairman of the New South Wales War Memorials and Public Monuments Advisory Boards, John, no doubt influenced by his own family's experience, put much energy into influencing how the war dead were commemorated. Geoffrey's name is inscribed on the stone arch war memorial at Honour Gardens' entrance.

Thank you for listening to me

