

Henry Allingham dies aged 113

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Henry Allingham, the world's oldest man and one of the very last British First World War veterans, died aged 113 at his care home near Brighton on Saturday 18 July 2009.



Henry Allingham

[Picture: Don McCullin, Crown Copyright/MOD 2008]

Born in Clapton in the East End of London on 6 June 1896, Mr Allingham joined the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) in 1915 and, after completing his training, was drafted to the RNAS Air Station at Great Yarmouth as an aircraft mechanic. He acted as an observer and gunner searching for U-boats, Zeppelins and mines over the North Sea.

In May 1916 he was ordered aboard HMS Kingfisher as it set out to join the British Battle Fleet, to help launch a Sopwith Schneider seaplane to look for the German Battle Fleet. It was the night when the Kingfisher met up with the fleet and Mr Allingham witnessed the ensuing Battle of Jutland.

In 1917 he was sent to France with 12 Squadron RNAS to support the Royal Flying Corps.

Mr Allingham's job as a mechanic was to service the aircraft and recover parts from downed planes. Pilots would often ask their mechanics to fly with them, and Mr Allingham would sit behind his pilot and drop bombs or operate the Lewis machine gun.



Henry Allingham, with Vice Admiral Adrian Johns, on his 111th birthday, celebrated aboard HMS Victory

[Picture: LA (Phot) Alex Cave, Crown Copyright/MOD 2007]

He saw service in Flanders at the Somme and Ypres with 12 Squadron until November, and then moved to the Aircraft Depot at Dunkirk where he stayed until the end of the war.

On 1 April 1918 the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps merged to form the Royal Air Force and Mr Allingham was transferred into the newly formed RAF as Rigger Aero (Aircraft Mechanic Second Class) and was one of the founding members of the new Service.

He completed his service as part of the army of occupation of Germany returning to England. Mr Allingham married his wife Dorothy in late 1918 and left the RAF a few months later in April 1919.

During the Second World War Mr Allingham was in a reserved occupation and was involved in providing counter-measures to the new German magnetic mines.

In 1939, Henry was called away from his Christmas lunch to lead a team in finding a solution to the menace of the magnetic mines dropped in Harwich bottling up the harbour. The team devised an effective system and after this success every ship was fitted with a device to neutralise magnetic mines.

First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, said:



Henry Allingham leading the veterans parade along Blackpool promenade
[Picture: Stuart Bingham, Crown Copyright/MOD 2008]

"It is with deep sorrow that the Royal Navy has learned of the death of Henry Allingham in this, the 100th year of naval aviation, and on behalf of everyone in the Royal Navy I pass my sincere condolences to his family and friends.

"The last surviving member of the Royal Naval Air Service, having joined in 1915, Henry also served at the Battle of Jutland in 1916 on the armed trawler HMS Kingfisher as an air mechanic, and his passing marks the end of an era.

"Henry will be remembered with great fondness for his strong sense of humour and joy of life, and he was an inspiration for all those serving in the Royal Navy, and the Fleet Air Arm in particular.

"It was a great privilege a few weeks ago for the Royal Navy to participate in Henry's 113th birthday celebrations when, as in his words, he became a teenager for the second time. We salute the passing of a great Serviceman and a very special man."

In 2003, Mr Allingham was awarded as Chevalier, Légion d'Honneur and in 2004 was an honoured guest for the unveiling of the British Air Services Memorial at St Omer Aerodrome, France.



Henry chats with friends at his birthday party
[Picture: Tim Ockenden, Press Association/2006]

On 16 March 2009 he was promoted to Officier, Légion d'Honneur by Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, the French Ambassador to Britain, who gave thanks to Henry on behalf of President Sarkozy for his part in protecting France during the World Wars.

In the same month, he was made the first honorary lifetime member of the Royal Naval Association and in April as well as becoming an honorary freeman of Brighton and Hove.

Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Glenn Torpy, said:

"It is with deep regret that the Royal Air Force has learned of Henry Allingham's death. Henry was a founder member of the Royal Air Force and his sad passing is a milestone in history.

"Henry was an inspiration to many and his thirst for life, cheery disposition and a desire to help others was his mark.

"He was a proud supporter of today's Royal Air Force and we, in turn, were able to learn much from his wise words and vast experience.



Henry Allingham in front of an SE5
[Picture: Allan House, Crown Copyright/MOD 2006]

"On behalf of the Royal Air Force, I offer our sincere condolences to all of Henry's family and friends. He was a great man who will be sorely missed."

Mr Allingham and his wife Dorothy were married for almost 53 years before her death in 1970. They had two daughters, Jean and Betty, six grandchildren, 16 great-grandchildren, 21 great, great grandchildren and one great, great, great grandchild.

Veterans Minister Kevan Jones said:

"I am greatly saddened to hear of the death of Henry Allingham. For one of his age, his vigour for life was extraordinary. I was humbled to meet somebody who had led such an amazing life and we owe such a huge debt of gratitude to him and his generation. My thoughts are with his family."

Mr Allingham's funeral will take place later this month at St Nicholas' Church in Brighton.