

## **Captain W. E. Johns**

### **Lingfield's Famous Author**



William Earl Johns was born in Hertford in 1893. After leaving school at 14 he was articled as a county municipal surveyor and, on completing his apprenticeship in 1912, became a sanitary inspector in Swaffham, Norfolk. Here he met his future wife, Maude Hunt, who was the daughter of a vicar and 11 years older than him. He also took steps to fulfilling a boyhood ambition to become a soldier by joining a territorial cavalry regiment, the King's Own Royal Regiment (Norfolk Yeomanry), in October 1913. He spent most of his weekends and holidays training with the yeomanry but despite this his relationship with Maude apparently developed over the next year. His regiment was immediately mobilised when war broke out at the beginning of August 1914. On a brief leave at the beginning of October 1914 he married Maude.

His regiment spent the next year training and carrying out local defence duties before finally receiving their embarkation orders in September 1915, shortly after Maude discovered she was pregnant. They were sent to Gallipoli where they were deployed in the trenches despite being a cavalry unit. They remained in Gallipoli until the withdrawal at the end of December when they were amongst the last to be evacuated to Egypt. They became part of the Suez Canal defence force and he received training as a machine gunner. In September 1916 he returned to England and was transferred to the Machine Gun Corps as a lance corporal. Maude had given birth to their son, Jack, in March 1916 and he was able to spend some time with them before he was sent to Salonika. He remained in Salonika until August 1917 when he contracted Malaria. While he recuperated in hospital, he made a decision that was to change his life; he applied for a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps.

In September 1917 he returned home to start his training as a pilot. His first flight lasted 5 seconds before he crashed. This was the first of many crashes, including two caused by him shooting his own

propellers. In April 1918 he in France flying DH4 Coffins) on missions into was shot down behind Towards the end of October, recaptured 4 days later and days before the armistice repatriated before the end of

He was effectively returned home to his wife father. In the four years hardly spent any time well and was suffering from combination of his difference and the fact that war had changed his horizons led to tensions with her and her family.



joined No. 55 Bombing Squadron bombers (nicknamed the Flying Germany. In September 1918 he enemy lines and became a POW. he managed to escape only to be sent to a punishment camp a few was signed. He was freed and the year.

demobbed in April 1919 and and son, who were living with her since their marriage they had together. Maude had never been the pains of acute arthritis. The unemployment, her health, the age

In November 1920 he re-joined the RAF as a flight officer on a seven-year commission, but this only led to him becoming a recruitment officer in London. He moved to London with his wife and child, but Maude soon returned to her father's home with their son. It was clear that the marriage had broken down. He asked her for a divorce but, according to Maude's sister, her father would not hear of it. He would continue to pay for Maude's upkeep until her death in 1961 including, due to her worsening health, the employment of two nurses. He also maintained a friendly relationship with Maude's sister Kathleen.

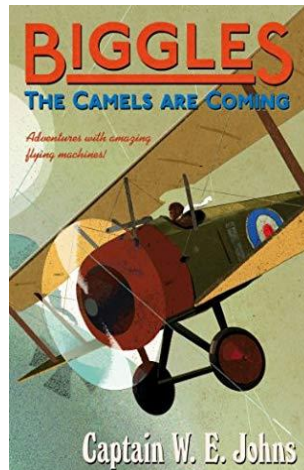
In August 1922, while still in London, he was involved in the enlistment of John Hume Ross who turned out to be Lawrence of Arabia.

In 1923 he was posted to Birmingham where he met and fell in love with Doris Leigh, who lived next door to him in Edgbaston. Her family was aware that he was married but could not obtain a divorce. Although upset at the situation they accepted matters. When he received a new posting to Newcastle in December 1924 Doris went with him. In August 1925 he was transferred to the Record Office in Ruislip and then to Air Defence Headquarters. Meanwhile Doris opened a guest house in Gerrard's Cross to help their income. He had been drawing as a hobby for some time but at this time he started to paint seriously, mainly aviation illustrations, and writing articles. His artwork began to find a ready market particularly in the Illustrated London News, which described him as "our specialist W.E. Johns".

His commission was coming to an end but before he left, he was invited to serve on the organising committee for the 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Air Force Air Display at Hendon. In October 1927 his commission came to an end and he decided to concentrate on establishing a career as an aviation illustrator. He and Doris moved to a small cottage in Lingfield where he would set up a studio. Shortly after moving to Lingfield The Thatched Cottage, which was larger, became available and they moved into it. They then moved Doris's mother and younger brother and sisters into to the other cottage.

In addition to his illustrations he started to provide small articles and short stories to an increasing number of publications including those for older boys. These articles were often billed as "by a flying man who is a well-known artist". In 1931 he was invited to edit "The Modern Boys' Book of Aircraft", which included several of his own articles. This led to several similar assignments and the joint authorship of a pictorial flying course. In March 1932 he became the editor of the magazine "Popular Flying" that included illustrations by Doris's brother Howard Leigh, who had become his protégé. The magazine quickly attracted a large following both in Britain and internationally. It received articles from around the world including one from Hermann Goering. Later that year he

published his first novel; a penny-dreadful paperback titled “Mossyface” was a thriller whose hero was an ex-RAF officer called Captain James Margerson. In April 1931 he included one of his own stories in popular Flying; “The White Fokker”, whose hero was a teenage RFC pilot Captain James Bigglesworth, “Biggles”. 6 further stories involving Biggles appeared in the following issues and such was their success that his compendium of the stories, *Camels Are Coming*. Johns his books despite there not explanation he gave for his old rank in the RFC. noticed or commented on publishers issued a paperback plus another eleven tales, as “The used the name “Capt. W.E. Johns” for being such a rank in the RAF. The calling himself a Captain was that was Although this was clear lie nobody this discrepancy.



By 1932 Johns had become must be maintained. required strong military opposed. This resulted in information from his rearmament and the 1936 he used editorials to

Japanese governments were pursuing policies that would make war inevitable.

His son, Jack, regularly visited him in Lingfield and, in 1935, started to co-write some of his magazine articles and provide some of his own. This was the start of his career in journalism. That year he contributed an article to a book edited by Howard Leigh, Doris’s brother.

By the beginning of 1937 Johns had published 11 Biggles books. In addition, he had published 4 adult thrillers/romances, 4 non-fiction books and 3 “Steeley” novels. Steeley was a sort of “Raffles” of the air. He had also become an accomplished gardener and was contributing articles to gardening publications, in particular “My Garden” magazine and a book “The Passing Show” that included illustrations by Howard Leigh. The house in Lingfield had by now become too small to accommodate all the visitors that came to call. Accordingly, he made arrangements for a new house to be built for Doris and himself at Colley Chase, Reigate Hill. They moved to it in January 1938 with Doris’s mother and eldest sister, but the other members of the Leigh family did not go with them. Her younger sister was due to get married later in the year. Howard Leigh had already married Olive Eldon at Lingfield Parish Church and set up home at Lyne House Farm, Lingfield. The eldest sister, Marjorie, was to become Johns’ secretary, typing his manuscripts and helping him to deal with vast amount of correspondence he was receiving. At the beginning of 1939 he was relieved of the editorship of Popular Flying because of the constant criticism in his editorials against the government.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 he wanted to return to the RAF, but he was considered too old. Instead he became a lecturer to the Air Defence Cadet Corps (later the Air Training Corps), a junior branch of the RAF that lectured to boys still at school. He lectured all over Britain on subjects such as “Combat Tactics in the Air” and “Escaping from PoW camps”. He also wrote specialised books on air subjects for the Air Ministry and Ministry of Information plus articles for “The Boy’s Own Paper” and “The Girl’s Own Paper”. At the time it was noted that many of the Battle of Britain fighter aces referred to Biggles as the source and inspiration of their combat tactics. In 1941 he started to write novels about a female pilot, “Worrals”, to encourage recruitment by the WAAF. Over the next nine years he would write 11 novels featuring Flight Officer Joan Worrals as Worrals and her chum Section Officer Betty “Frecks” Lovell in daring missions. These were followed by novels featuring “Gimlet” a Commando hero. In addition to his lecturing and writing he also became an ARP until 1944.

In 1939 his son married Sabena Hammond, the nurse that was looking after his wife. His first granddaughter was born in 1940 with a second following three years later. Sadly, Howard Leigh

discovered that he was suffering from cancer and then died of a heart attack in February 1942 at the age of 32. He is buried in the graveyard at Lingfield Parish Church.

By mid-1944 the constant bombing, with some near misses, was getting on his nerves and was affecting his writing. He decided to move to Grantown-on-Spey situated in the Cairngorm Mountains. He had previously been on a fishing holiday to the area and liked its solitude and tranquillity. He and Doris rented Pitchroy Lodge, a large house just outside the town. They were to remain there until 1953 when they returned south to a large house in Hampton Court, London.

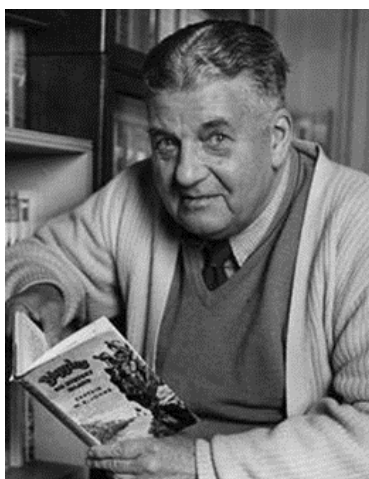
In 1954 his only son, Jack, died from tuberculosis after suffering from diabetes for a number of years. Jack had been working as a reporter for the East Grinstead and lived with his family in Dormansland. It was discovered that Jack had been suffering from multiple sclerosis, which combined with the diabetes and tuberculosis proved fatal. Prior to Jack's death Johns had paid for his son to stay at a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland.

The post war period saw Johns at his most successful with his books selling all over the world, except the U.S.A. were seen as being too British, Biggles radio series in Britain and Australia, Biggles comic strips and even braille versions of his Biggles books being published. Johns donated all rights to the braille versions to the National Association for the Blind. He started to publish science fiction novels and in 1960 Granada launched a Biggles television series.

Johns' wife Maude died in a nursing home in 1961. He and Doris discussed the possibility of marriage but decided against it as it could damage his image if the news got out. The last few years of his were spent fairly quietly. He continued with his prolific output with up to five books published in a year. In June 1968, while working on his latest Biggles book, he collapsed and died from coronary thrombosis; he was 75. A few months later Doris died from cancer.

By the time of his death Johns had published 102 Biggles books, 11 Worrals books, 10 Gimlet books, 6 Steeley books, 10 science fiction novels, 8 other juvenile titles, 11 adult thrillers and romances, 3 anthologies and 8 non-fiction books. He had also written for a number of journals and been broadcast on radio and television. He had always hoped that a Biggles film might be made but he did not live to see it; a film was finally released in 1986.

W.F. Stevenson, January 2020



Sources: -By Jove, Biggles! – Peter Beresford Ellis & Piers Williams (1981)  
W.E Johns & Biggles Appreciation Society website – [wejas.org.uk](http://wejas.org.uk)