

St. Peter's Aldborough Hatch

The grave of Harry Jassby in the churchyard



Harry Walter Jassby in 1918

Born in Montreal, Harry Walter Jassby was a 19-year-old pharmacy student at McGill University, the son of Mr & Mrs Jassby of 4143 Oxford Avenue, Montreal, Canada.

Wishing to fulfil his dream of becoming a pilot, he joined the Royal Flying Corps (forerunner of the Royal Air Force) in 1917 as Canada did not have an air force at the time. He lied about his age when he enlisted and his grave indicates he was 22 when, in fact, he was just 20. Before going overseas he learned to fly during his training as an aerial gunner in Canada near Toronto and was made a Second Lieutenant.

Harry Jassby arrived in England in April 1918 where he was assigned to a squadron based at Fairlop Aerodrome. Second Lieutenant Jassby was learning how to fly the famous World War 1 fighter aircraft, the Sopwith Camel. The Biplane was extremely agile, but also dangerous to fly, especially for service pilots. Jassby was among a group of men who had been asked to fly in a V-formation over London to celebrate the end of the war. Second Lieutenant Jassby was flying a Camel E142 when the plane above his lost its motor and collided with his, causing a crash. He died seven months after landing in England on 6th November 1918, just five days before Armistice Day.

The practice at that time was to bury fallen servicemen in a cemetery nearest to their base and he was buried in the churchyard at St. Peter's. He received a Jewish burial service with military honours. Second Lieutenant Jassby was the last fatal wartime casualty of 54 Training Depot Squadron (TDS) at Fairlop Aerodrome.

By cruel co-incidence news of Second Lieutenant Jassby's death did not arrive until Armistice Day, 11th November. *"The Great War had ended and there was cheering and dancing in the streets of Montreal. The doorbell rang at my Grandmother's home. A telegram was delivered,"* Carolyn Steinman, his niece, said. *"My mother opened it and read the dreadful news to her mother Minerva."* It was a dreadful blow. Minerva's husband, Louis Jassby, had died in 1914 at the age of 39 leaving her a widow with seven children. *"Uncle Harry loved to fly,"* said Carolyn, whose mother, the late Lottie Notkin, was Jassby's sister and the last of his six siblings to survive. She died in 1994 aged 93.

When this was researched in 2004, in addition to Carolyn, Second Lieutenant Jassby was survived by his nephews Kenny (in Israel), Danny and Alan (in the United States) and Carolyn's sister, Lois Spiegel, and brother Harry Notkin, his namesake, as well as many great nieces and nephews.

In January 1985 Carolyn and her husband, Arnold, visited the grave at St. Peter's for the first time after making enquiries with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. They met the Rabbi of the Southwest Essex Reform and Reform Synagogue, Oaks Lane, and the Vicar of St Peter's. The Rabbi and Carolyn's husband recited Kaddish and the Vicar said a prayer. *"This was an extremely emotional moment in my life,"* said Carolyn. *"I mentioned that maybe his body could be removed to a Jewish Cemetery, but both clergy were quite adamant that his resting place should remain as it is."*

The War Graves Commission wrote to Carolyn explaining that its principle throughout the world is that the graves of the war dead, whether they died in battle or by other cause, *"should not be disturbed unless there is some overriding reason in the public interest"* such as the construction of a road that could not be alternatively routed.

Second Lieutenant Jassby's grave is on the left inside the front gate at St. Peter's. The Star of David together with the insignia of the Royal Air Force appears on his tombstone with the inscription: *'In life he flew the azure sky, in death he flew to heaven high.'* The traditional Hebrew text within the Star of David translates as: *'May his Soul be bound up in the bundle of life'.*

The grave is maintained by members of the local Jewish community, who visit it regularly and follow the tradition of placing a pebble or stone on the top of the gravestone to signify that someone has honoured the deceased person's memory with a visit. Those of us who have been privileged to witness the gathering have been struck by the dignity of the participants and the solemnity of the occasion.

Extracted from: *Aldborough Hatch – The Village in the Suburbs – A History* by Ron Jeffries