

Aged seventeen, Fitz enlisted in the British Army and was posted to France. He fought in the Battle of the Somme and his bravery led

him to be promoted to the rank of acting sergeant before his nineteenth birthday. When the War Office appealed for recruits to the Royal Flying Corps, Fitz applied and entered the School of Military Aeronautics at Reading in March 1918 for training. Eventually he was posted to sail to France with a flight squadron on 11 November – the day the war ended!

During his training, Fitz fell in love and married Violet Clarke in secret on his twenty-first birthday in 1919 as RAF officers were forbidden to associate with non-commissioned Women's Royal Air Force members. He received invaluable experience as an RAF mail pilot in peace time.

After resigning from the RAF, Fitz returned to Dublin with his wife and baby when Civil War broke out in 1922, feeling that his country needed him. When he presented himself for service at Baldonnel he was commissioned with the rank of lieutenant. Fitz literally flew into many close shaves and ambushes and wrote later that the Civil War "proved conclusively to the whole world that Ireland...was God's own country populated by the devil's own people".

James Christopher Fitzmaurice, later to be known as 'Fitz', moved to Maryborough (now Portlaoise) at the age of four in 1902 when his father, a prison warder, was transferred from Mountjoy. He attended the Christian Brothers' School until he was sixteen.

As a lad, Fitz spent every minute he could, helping out in Aldritts' Garage where motor-cars were designed and built. The Aldritts also built the first aeroplane to be assembled in what is now the Republic of Ireland! The young Fitz assisted on the construction of this flying machine and looked on proudly when it was wheeled to the largest meadow in the area for its maiden flight. Shortly after becoming airborne the little machine crashed and was almost written-off devastating Fitz, however, in his memoirs he wrote, "From that moment I decided that this new art of flying, if it ever came to anything, would be one of my foremost interests in life."

Aged sixteen, Fitz became an Irish Volunteer responding to John Redmond's call to set up a nationalist militia to resist the Ulster Volunteer Force. As the promise of Home Rule was stalled by the British Government and Irish morale faded due to a lack of real action, Fitz's longing to be a real soldier increased. On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany which led to a split in the Irish Volunteer movement as Redmond offered its support to fight alongside the Ulster Volunteers. Although Fitz felt let down by Redmond, he remained loyal to him and as he observed

the role of the Irish Volunteers diminishing, he decided to join the British Army filled with a sense of 'thrilling adventure'.

## Friday 5 October, 7pm Dunamais Arts Centre

opening of exhibition in the gallery  
speakers

Minister Charles Flanagan will officially open 'Fitz & the 1st East-to-West Atlantic Flight'  
Brendon Deacy, artist & exhibition curator

please take your seats in the auditorium

MC: Muireann Ní Chonaill, Arts Officer & Creative Ireland Co-ordinator for Laois  
speakers

Cllr John King, Cathaoirleach of Laois County Council  
Teddy Fennelly, Chairman of the Fitzmaurice Commemoration Committee  
Brig. Gen. Seán Clancy, GOC of the Irish Air Corps  
Alan Phelan, 'The Portlaoise Plane'  
Prof. Dr. Bernd Hamacher, University of Bremen  
Ralph James, former GOC Irish Air Corps  
Michael Parsons, Laois Heritage Society & The Heritage Council

musical interlude by Music Generation Harpettes

short break

'Fitz & the 1st East-to-West Atlantic Flight' (2018) film premiere  
produced by Louis Deacy

'Col. James Fitzmaurice: Transatlantic Pioneer' (1998) film  
introduced by Tim Costello, Director

reception in the mezzanine

## Saturday 6 October, 11am Áras an Chontae, Portlaoise

speakers  
Cllr John King, Cathaoirleach of Laois County Council  
Hans Rahmann

wreath laying at the Fitzmaurice bust

presentation of Irish & Laois flags to German guests

fly past by the Irish Historic Flight Association  
scheduled for 11.30am (weather dependent)



www.brendondeacy.com

# & THE 1<sup>st</sup> EAST-TO-WEST ATLANTIC FLIGHT FITZ

This exhibition salutes Colonel James Fitzmaurice, the Irish airman affectionately known as 'Fitz', who flew into aviation history by co-piloting the first aeroplane to successfully cross the Atlantic in a westerly direction.

On 12<sup>th</sup> April 1928, the 'Bremen' took off from Baldonnel Aerodrome with a crew of three: Fitz, Capt. Hermann Köhl & Baron Von Huenefeld. Just over thirty-six hours later the world changed as they landed safely on Greenly Island in Canada.

Fitz's thrilling life story, from his formative years in Laois to his fearless flight and legacy, is told through original artefacts, information-panels & short films designed & curated by Brendon Deacy.

exhibition runs from 4 – 25 October 2018  
at the Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise  
Monday – Friday 10am – 5.30pm & Saturday 10am – 5pm

top: Irish Army Air Corps officers, Baldonnel, 1926, Fitz in front  
right: Fitz & Violet at their wedding  
bottom: Fitz in a Bristol Fighter during the Civil War



## WEDDING AND WARS

## THE EARLY YEARS



# DEPARTURES

right: Brendon Deacy researching on the 'Bremen' | second row: Louis Deacy filming at Baldonnell third row: the heroes at their book launch, 1928; Pádraig Fleming & German counterparts reading Teddy Fennelly's book as the Baron's nephew looks on 2018 | bottom: Fitz revisiting Baldonnell in 1962



Fitz's hopes to capitalise on his fame soon fell apart. Whilst in America he had been instructed by the Irish Minister not to engage in any financial activities as he would be adequately compensated on his return – this eventually amounted to a miserly £150. Further insult came when he was questioned by the Minister of Defence about how much money he had made from the 'Bremen' flight. In February 1929 Fitz tendered his resignation as Commanding Officer of the Air Corps in frustration at what he called 'impossible conditions'.

Proposing innovative ideas to establish Ireland as a leader in world aviation, he sadly received no backing in his own country. Another plan to sell Junkers' design patents in America ended on the day of the Wall Street Crash. Rumours of his socialising, gambling and womanising took their toll on his marriage and divorce proceedings ensued.

Fitz secured finance to enter an air race from England to Australia but his plane was forced to withdraw over a vague technicality. His last chance to be re-established as an aviation icon was snatched away in 1934 and he bitterly departed from the public stage.

Frail, almost blind and totally disillusioned, Fitz lived his last years in a modest flat in Dublin. Years earlier, he had written, "If you have the misfortune to do anything useful for Ireland they do everything possible to destroy you. Then when you are dead they dig you up and laud your achievements as a bolster to their own mediocrity." He died on 26 September 1965, immediately becoming a national hero again and given a State Funeral with full military honours.



# THE WORLD SALUTES

As the history-making news of the successful flight broke, there was world-wide rejoicing. The international press paid tribute with victorious headlines. The crew of the 'Bremen' rested at the lighthouse on Greenly Island as relief was organised to collect and take them on to their destination of New York. Mechanics also arrived to make the 'Bremen' airworthy again.

On 30 April, the 'Three Musketeers of the Air', as they were now being called, were treated to a ticker-tape parade over a ten mile route around New York where over two million people lined the sidewalks in jubilation. The 'Irish Independent' reported, "the cheering of the people was on a scale never before experienced in this city." Mayor Walker presented the flyers with Medals of Valour and Honorary Freedom of the City. Welcoming the men to the White House on 2 May, President Calvin Coolidge bestowed the US Distinguished Flying Cross on them – the first foreigners ever to receive this award.

After an extensive and euphoric tour of American and Canadian cities where they enjoyed congratulations, the airmen returned to Europe. There was huge acclaim in Germany and on 3 July they made a triumphant return to Dublin where they were cheered rapturously all along the ten mile parade route from Baldonnell to the GPO before receiving the Freedom of the City.



# THE FLIGHT

After making their confessions and taking communion, Fitz and Köhl ate breakfast quietly in the officer's mess at about 4am, whilst the Baron oversaw the loading of provisions which included oranges which were peeled to lessen the weight for a few more drops of fuel! Farewells were said to the assembled crowd at 5am and then the 'Bremen' gathered speed. As the aeroplane was about to take off, a sheep wandered across its path. Undeterred, they reached maximum speed thrust to rise the plane in the direction of the Irish midlands and on to the Atlantic. Few words were spoken on the

flight due to the engine's noise and the language barrier. Köhl and Fitz alternated on the controls for three hour periods by day and half-hour spells at night. At 21.00 GMT they were more than half way across. Twenty four hours of flying in good weather ended as they flew into a fierce storm and zero visibility. The storm lashed without mercy for hours and the crew lamented the absence of a radio which had been sacrificed in favour of extra fuel. Temperatures plummeted below freezing point.

The crew overcame the violent storm, cabin lighting failure and a suspected oil leak, before thick fog cleared to reveal a wonderful star-studded sky. Later, the clouds below cleared and a huge expanse of snow-covered land became visible. Realising that they had strayed hundreds of miles north of their course they flew south through blizzards until a lighthouse on a small island was spotted. The 'Bremen' was coolly landed on the frozen surface which then broke to leave its nose in the ice and its tail in the air. They had arrived safely on Greenly Island in Canada and made history.

top: the 'Bremen' in flight  
middle right: inside the cockpit of the 'Bremen'  
bottom: New York Times front page, 13 April 1928  
background image: the sky over the Atlantic coast of Canada on the actual night of 12 April 1928



# PREPARING FOR TAKE-OFF

Fitz was promoted to second-in-command of the Air Corps in 1925 but he sought further adventure. The Atlantic had been crossed by air from west to east in 1919 but it was considered impossible to fly across the ocean in a westerly direction against the prevailing winds. A number of attempts had ended fatally but Fitz eagerly accepted an offer to "have a go" with British pilot Captain R.H. McIntosh in the 'Princess Xenia' (top left) in September 1927. Unfortunately adverse weather forced them back to Ireland after flying for about 300 miles west.

While Fitz was sent on a senior officer's course at the Curragh another plan to fly the Atlantic was taking shape in Germany. Herman Köhl, who would pilot the 'Bremen', and Baron Von Huenefeld, the main promoter of the project, convinced their technical team and financial backers that it would make sense to take off from Ireland.

They needed an experienced flyer to join them plus the cooperation of the Irish Army Air Corps. Fitz, who by now was officer-in-command at Baldonnell, was their man and he was thrilled at this second chance to attempt the first east-to-west Atlantic flight.

At 8.20am on Monday 26 March 1928, the 'Bremen', a beautifully designed aeroplane, took off from Tempelhof airport, Berlin. Just over nine hours later it landed at Baldonnell. After a number of test flights the Atlantic take-off was scheduled for 5am on 12 April 1928 (middle left). Fitz was granted permission to take a month's leave to travel abroad with the grim warning that if he went by air, he did so at his own risk and if his life was lost then his dependents would have no claim on the State.



Capt. Herman Köhl, Baron Von Huenefeld & Fitz