



## Terrifying story of pilot who leapt to his death

By John Lawrence

Front page stories don't get much more dramatic than this. Thanks to the British Newspaper Archive for circulating this image of *The Illustrated Police News* from 100 years ago telling the story of a pilot who was forced to make a desperate leap from his burning plane over East Finchley.



Aerial disaster: The dramatic front page of the *Illustrated Police News* and tragic pilot Peter Legh, who died when his aircraft crashed.

**Burning wreckage**  
The article from 8 May 1919 says that while undergoing an altitude test, the biplane owned by the British Aerial Transport Co and piloted by Flight Commander Peter Legh suddenly caught fire. Eyewitnesses said there was a loud explosion above the roar of the engine and the machine was covered in flames. It threatened to drop like a stone directly into East Finchley's Market Place, which was crowded at the time.

Fortunately it passed clear of the market square and dropped into some gardens between two rows of villas alongside what was then the Great Northern Railway. The newspaper report said that so narrowly did it miss the postal sorting office, still there in Market Place, that pieces of burning wreckage fell on the roof.

**Brave in the highest degree**  
Amazingly, the pilot was observed walking along one of his plane's wings when still some distance from the ground. Holding up his flying suit to act as an improvised parachute, he took a desperate jump. Unfortunately, his fall was unbroken and he hit the ground, dying instantly from a broken neck. His clothing was still alight when his corpse was found.

It was a tragic end for Flight Commander Peter Legh, just 25 at the time of his death. He had trained in Hendon and had seen active service as a fighter pilot in France and Belgium in 1916, where he had been seriously injured. "He was always the very essence of modesty, brave in the highest degree, and ever eager to tackle new problems in the science of aviation,"

read a tribute in *Flight Weekly* at the time.

### Illustrated news

The front page of the *Police News* reporting the pilot's death is certainly a prime example of vivid visual storytelling, with its illustration of his biplane plummeting towards the ground in flames in its final moments over East Finchley. Flight Commander Legh is shown plunging headfirst from the wings, with a cameo portrait alongside showing him in his flying gear and goggles.

The newspaper, established in 1864, sold for three halfpence in 1919. There are many other editions of the same publication along with thousands of other titles to be read in the British Newspaper Archive. Sign up at [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

## Places for 10k fun race going fast

Places are going fast for the annual Race the Neighbours event that pits amateur athletes from N2, N10, N6 and N22 against each other in a friendly 10k run between East Finchley and Alexandra Palace.

Organisers are predicting it could be their most popular year yet as local runners "get their mojo back" after the pandemic. Each year, average times are taken from all runners and the Cherry Tree cup is awarded to the winning postcode.

This year's race takes place on Sunday 4 June, starting as always from Cherry Tree Wood. Places are limited to 500 and entry closes on Friday 26 May. Sign up at [racetheneighbours.com](http://racetheneighbours.com). Volunteers are also needed to act as marshals along the course. Contact [racetheneighbours@gmail.com](mailto:racetheneighbours@gmail.com)



Park run: Last year's Race the Neighbours runners set off in Cherry Tree Wood