

THE FEW WHO REACHED FOR THE SKY: James Holland

On Friday, June 18, 1915, Lieutenant Dyke Acland was reconnoitring over Poelcappelle on the Western Front at around 4,000 feet, when he and his observer suddenly found themselves under attack by a German aircraft. Frantically, Acland weaved and turned, dodging incessant machine-gun fire until his attacker had spent all his rounds. At this point, Acland's observer opened fire. Hitting the German, he watched it dive, wounded, out of the fray. Suddenly, their plane was peppered by anti-aircraft fire from the ground. A moment later, shards of shrapnel tore into their machine, rupturing the fuel tank.



Members of an R.F.C. squadron on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, with a Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2a aircraft in 1913 Photo: GETTY

Lieutenant Acland faced a terrifying choice: escape the flames and jump to certain death, or to try to crash-land before they were incinerated. Showing the kind of stoic fortitude that is a feature of the best pilots, he plunged the plane into a steep dive. Its force fanned the flames, which rapidly began to lick around their feet; the heat cracked the glass of their goggles; the plane's fabric burned like a torch. Despite his terror, and his pain, Acland stuck to the controls. Not only did he manage to crash-land the plane before it disintegrated, but he and his observer leapt out as the fuselage collapsed. It was one of the luckiest escapes by any British airmen in the entire war.

This Friday marks the centenary of the Royal Flying Corps, the fledgling force made up of men like Acland that developed into the Royal Air Force. And if the servicemen recently made redundant by the Ministry of Defence are angry - as this newspaper reports today - that they will still be eligible to be called up at any time in the next two decades, they should spare a thought for their predecessors.

The planes they flew were made of wood and wire struts, covered with Irish linen and dope, all of which were horribly flammable. Although parachutes were being developed, they were not given to pilots, because it was felt that the temptation to jump out rather than stay and fight would be too great. When Major Hugh Dowding, a squadron commander (and future Air Chief Marshal), complained about this, he was promptly sent home by General "Boom" Trenchard, who became the RAF's first commander.

The slaughter in the trenches is well-known, but the war in the air was equally brutal, which was why even the very best more often than not came to untimely ends. Leading aces such as Albert Ball and Mick Mannock were killed as much by their own exhaustion as by enemy bullets. It required phenomenal bravery, skill and concentration to go into combat.

Every time a pilot got into his plane, he faced a potentially horrific death. Such was the demand for pilots that more and more men arrived with insufficient training and paid the price; all told, nearly 9,500 died.

Yet if the treatment of pilots left something to be desired, it was not entirely surprising. That the Royal Flying Corps was able to send any aircraft to war was something of a miracle, and largely down to a handful of pioneers - engineers, adventurers and men of vision, mostly operating through private enterprise rather than through government backing. Their motto, which the RAF continues to use, was "per ardua ad astra": "through adversity to the stars". The phrase came not from antiquity but rather *The People of the Mist*, an adventure yarn by Rider Haggard. Whether George V knew that when he gave it his blessing, it was curiously appropriate. Rider Haggard's heroes are adventurous, patriotic, and recklessly brave - rather like the pioneers who founded the RFC in the years running up to the outbreak of war.

The BE 2, the staple biplane with which Britain went to war, was typical of this spirit of enterprise. Working at a balloon factory in Farnborough, designer Geoffrey de Havilland was refused funding for a new aircraft, but was given the necessary resources to repair a French aircraft. Starting almost from scratch, he took the opportunity to create his own craft. Another pioneer was Tommy Sopwith, who began building his first aircraft in a rough wooden shed because he couldn't afford to rent a proper workshop. With just five men to help him, he flew it out of the shed himself once it was done.

Sopwith, like most other aircraft designers, was a member of the Royal Aero Club, based at Brooklands in Surrey. Here, ideas were shared and discussed, and the first form of a pilot's licence issued. These men risked not only their livelihoods but also their lives, as they experimented with and refined their machines.

Even within the military, those who saw the potential of flight were few. The Army had used balloons for reconnaissance in the Sudan and during the Boer War, but it was left to a handful of converts and privately taught pilots to make the case for air power. Two such men were Brigadier-General David Henderson and Major Frederick Sykes. Both had served in the Boer War, and taught themselves to fly in their own time. Both passionately believed in the importance of effective reconnaissance, and that this could be best achieved with aircraft.

By the end of 1911, with a European war looming and the years of experimentation beginning to bear fruit, the Government finally formed a committee to consider the development of aerial navigation for naval and military purposes. A series of recommendations were put forward, which amounted to the formation of a new service, to be called the Royal Flying Corps. It was to have a naval and military (army) wing and a central flying school, and its own aircraft factory and permanent advisory committee. On April 13, the Royal Flying Corps came into being.

Within the committee, it was three men - Henderson, Sykes, and Major Duncan McInnes - who were largely responsible for the recommendations. It was they who decided that the tactical unit should be a squadron, based around three flights, 12 aircraft and 24 pilots, rather than the French "escadrille" of six planes; it was felt that this was the right size to induce team spirit. They also decreed that left and right should be port and starboard, in a nod to the Navy; that those in the ranks should be

called “airmen”; and that pilots should be officers, largely so that they could not only fly together but live together, too. Even to this day, officers and NCOs mess separately.

By the outbreak of war, there were seven squadrons, which were soon on the way to France, and the ethos of the RFC was firmly established. Typical was Major Charles Burke, first commander of 2 Squadron, who instilled in his men a strong corporate identity, as well as an emphasis on the team rather than the individual. Burke made it clear that if his men ran out of ammunition while shooting down enemy balloons, he expected them to sacrifice themselves by flying into them.

The fledgling RFC had gone to war believing its role would be predominantly one of reconnaissance, but by the time Lieutenant Acland was diving in flames, aircraft were being used in a number of different roles, not least bombing, ground attack and air-to-air combat, a form of warfare that would flourish in the final two years of the war. This was the time of the aces, of dogfights in which the leading pilots amassed vast numbers of kills.

By the war’s end, Britain had more than 5,000 pilots, and the RFC had become an independent service, now renamed the Royal Air Force. But while the nature of air power had changed as rapidly as at any point in aviation history, and a Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough had been established, the RFC and RAF continued to rely heavily on private enterprise. Tommy Sopwith produced the iconic Sopwith Camel; later, with Hawker, he helped develop the Hurricane and even the Harrier. Geoffrey de Havilland, too, produced some of the most important aircraft of the last 100 years. Their heritage continues: BAE, which makes most of Britain’s current military aircraft, has incorporated these names and others over the past 40 years.

The anniversary of the RFC’s foundation reminds us that while combat has evolved, the same principles remain. “Loyalty to the squadron is still central to our ethos,” says Willy Hackett, a current RAF test pilot, “and we have those founders of the RFC to thank for that.” “Shooting a line” - boasting - is as frowned on then as it was now. The names of Henderson, Sykes, Burke, et al may now be largely forgotten, their work eclipsed by the heroes of the First and Second World Wars. But their legacy continues to benefit Britain.

James Holland is a military historian. His latest book, 'Dam Busters: The Race to Smash the German Dams, 1943' (Bantam), will be published in May.