



ROYAL FLYING CORPS, ROYAL NAVAL AIR SERVICE, ROYAL AIR FORCE

The RFC was formed in April 1912, initially for reconnaissance and artillery ‘spotting’ – signalling to the gunners adjustments needed for greater accuracy – and a balloon section which was eventually placed along the front lines to observe the enemies defences. Bombing came later with the bombs around the feet of the observer who dropped them over the side.

There was a constant power struggle between the War Office and the Admiralty and the Royal Naval Air Service was established by splitting off from the RFC on 1st July 1914. The two services had the same central flying school but whereas the RFC’s main action was on the Western Front with some deployment in other theatres of war and in the fight against the Zeppelins, the RNAS concentrated more on protecting Naval bases, shipping and the home docks and ports, plus attacking the Zeppelin sheds.

In the First World War as in the Second, Lincolnshire was the chosen area for airfields. The RNAS requisitioned land, established a seaplane base, a gunnery school and several patrol aerodromes along the coast and an airship training station at Cranwell.

At Eastcheap on the Isle of Sheppey the Aero Club (later the Royal Aero Club) of London had been formed originally for lighter-than-air flight (balloons, dirigibles, airships) but more interest in fixed wing aircraft developed after the Wright Brothers’ success. Initially all this was for the rich but it began to interest the military and the Aero Club offered some of their land for the Admiralty to use to train their officers. It became the headquarters of the Naval Wing and a major base for the RNAS.

Originally air attacks were made by seaplanes, winched up onto and off of ships but experiments were carried out at Eastcheap developing the means of planes taking off from ships and landing back on. It was all very hazardous and there was a long way to go before the first aircraft carrier was built. Aeroplanes were launched by catapult and the pilot hoped to find his way back before his fuel was exhausted. Even so he had to land in the sea. The seaplane was obviously best for this but cumbersome when attacking. Aeroplanes on the other hand, although more flexible, meant the pilot ditching and being picked up in time.

The Cuxhaven Raid: Britain had always been protected from direct attack by the Navy but the development of airships meant she was now vulnerable. Destroying the Zeppelins in the air was proving to be almost impossible so the answer was to attack them in their hangars.

The raids started with those that were nearest – Dusseldorf and Cologne, but although one pilot found the target and dropped bombs the raiders were thwarted by thick fog. Another attempt was made on October 8th and again the weather was a problem, although one pilot scored a direct hit at Dusseldorf where a bomb penetrated the shed as the Zeppelin was being filled with hydrogen. A huge flame shot up in the air, said to be about 500 feet. The pilot was lucky to escape.

A subsequent raid on Friedrichshafen was successful so the green light was given to attack Cuxhaven. Short's bi-planes were used (the Short Brothers aircraft works were established at Eastchurch). Distance was the problem. Cuxhaven was in Northern Germany near the mouth of the Elbe and beyond the fuel capacity of an aircraft flying from England so it was decided to launch the planes from ships. One attempt was foiled once more by the weather but on 24th December 1914 three seaplane carriers were on their way to the Heligoland Bight supported by a large escort. The operation was not successful regarding the Zeppelin hangars; the weather was uncooperative again and the distance meant the planes did not have enough spare fuel to 'hang around'. However, one attacked two German cruisers, another attacked an anti-aircraft site and another a submerging submarine. The Navy and the Air Service had had practise in working together and organising a large force in support, the first time such a thing had been attempted and also the first attempt to attack by air from the sea.

Interestingly there may have been another of our village boys involved – a sailor on the HMS Arethusa, one of the supporting escorts. He was **SIDNEY COLLIER** of Saxbys Lane, but the problem is his service record is missing and there is some confusion in establishing his birth which is shown as 'about 1900' on the 1911 census. He was certainly in the War from the start because there is a medal card for him showing he was entitled to all three medals. We also know he was on the HMS Arethusa, which is described as having a 'brief but spectacular and action-packed career'. She was at the Battle of Heligoland Bight and the Battle of Dogger Bank but hit a mine on the 11th February 1916, off Felixstowe. She did not sink but lost power and drifted ashore and was wrecked.

The Navy took boys very young, sending them to 'shore establishments' for training and classing them as Boy 1 and Boy 2. One of the acknowledged heroes on the Formidable was a boy who had just passed his 16th birthday. At Jutland there was a 15 year old midshipman fresh from Dartmouth Naval College who survived being in three ships that sank and, also at Jutland, the VC was awarded to a 16 year old, who holds the record for being the youngest recipient. It was awarded posthumously. If Sydney was born in 1898, or lied about his age, he could well have been not only on the Cuxhaven raid but also in the other battles.

The RFC, Arras and Bloody April: (that is an adjective and not an expletive although by the time May arrived the word was probably used in both senses).

As a young service the RFC had no ‘battle honours’ but if anything came near it, it must have been the experiences of the young pilots and observers when the Canadian and British infantry went ‘Over the top’ and captured the Vimy Ridge in April 1917. It was acknowledged that this success, which was extraordinary, with the soldiers having to fight their way through some of the most extensive and complex German defences, was due to the men of the RFC who pinpointed the exact position of the artillery. The problem was that the planes were obsolete, the weather appalling for flying and many of the young men straight from flying school with no experience and virtually no ‘flying hours’ either. There was no way they were going to be able to meet the ‘circus’ of Manfred von Richtofen and their life expectancy of 11 days dropped to 92 Hours.

Reconnaissance aircraft were unarmed, to make room for the camera. The aircraft were made of fabric, timber and wires, were said to be very strong, but still very vulnerable, particularly to fire.

275 Aircraft were shot down, there were 421 casualties of which 207 died.

The air services had fought prejudices when they were first established, although the RNAS fared better than the RFC. The army seemed incapable of being inventive – most oddly, for example, it was the Navy who were enthusiastic about tanks while the army could not see how, like machine guns, they could replace the cavalry.

Some politicians, though, were enthusiastic to the point of being poetical.

“The heavens are their battlefield; they are the cavalry of the clouds. High above the squalor and the mud, so high in the firmament that they are not visible from earth, they fight out the eternal issues of right and wrong. Their daily, yea, their nightly struggles, are like the Miltonic conflict between the winged hosts of light and darkness. They fight the foe high up and they fight him low down; they skim like armed swallows, hanging over trenches full of armed men, wrecking convoys, scattering infantry, attacking battalions on the march. Every flight is a romance; every report is an epic. They are the knighthood of this war, without fear and without reproach.” **David Lloyd George in the House of Commons, 29th October, 1917.**

However, between the two wars the newly formed RAF was going to have to struggle, resented by the Navy, regarded as an unnecessary fad by politicians, too expensive at a time of cuts, it faced extinction. Fortunately, it survived.

Local men in the RFC, RNAS and RAF:

RNAS:

Albert Stanford of Newchapel Road

Harold Percy Skinner of 3 Waterside Cottages, Edenbridge Road

Brian Walker of Waterside, Edenbride Road

Thomas King Morris, S. Wallis and Fred Pierce for whom we have no details.

RFC:

Arthur Harry Francis Brothers of Hackney and Dormansland

George Hornby Birley of Claridges, Dormansland

H.W. Selby, W.E. Boorer, George Draper, G.S.Fiveash for whom we have no details.

RAF:

They all mustered for the RAF but we only have three who are referred to as such.

Charles Sales - no information

James William Bryant of Dormansland

Brian Walker as listed above.

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Sources:

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