



Brigadier-General Sir David Henderson's Royal Flying Corps – British Aerial Reconnaissance in the Opening Salvos

by Terrence J. Finnegan

“Any failing in reconnaissance is almost necessarily fatal.” David Henderson, *Field Intelligence, Its Principles and Practices*.¹

HENDERSON – INTELLIGENCE BACKGROUND

If there was ever an enigma on the early history of aviation, it is the oversight by historians concerning one of the institutional framers of aviation's potential – Lieutenant-General Sir David Henderson. It is perhaps by design rather than coincidence that this leading military aviation pioneer was a former army intelligence officer. Little has been written about Henderson. Modern-day web sites only provide a brief introduction. The Great War historian John Buchan wrote an obituary for the British *Quarterly Review* upon Henderson's death in 1921 that summarized Henderson's persona and administration: “In the noisy business of war a man so utterly unselfish as he might well have been crowded out, and in

popular esteem he was surpassed by many more showy figures. Advertisement and intrigue of any kind were so repulsive to him that he scorned even the more innocent devices which assist success.”²

Henderson commenced his military training as an engineer and was subsequently commissioned an officer of infantry in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in 1882. In 1890, he was promoted to captain. Kitchener appointed him as Director of Military Intelligence (DMI) while in South Africa. In that role he led development of the tactical intelligence system for the theater of operations. Henderson established precise

For the estimation of the numbers of a visible enemy, the time test, when it can be applied, gives, as a rule, the most satisfactory results, for the pace at which troops march varies very little.⁷ requirements for intelligence officers at different levels resulting in a more structured daily and weekly reporting process. Intelligence under his direction not only served senior headquarters, it was

also disseminated to subordinate units.³ Henderson wrote *Field Intelligence, Its Principles and Practices* in 1904 under the sponsorship of the British General Staff. The work was an up-to-date guide for a field intelligence officer that captured most of the tactical intelligence lessons of the second Boer War. *Field Intelligence* stood as the standard for the British Army for several decades. It was a concise, well organized

field manual consisting of three chapters covering methods of collection followed by five chapters on personnel and organization, the interpretation of battlefield information, the provision and handling of guides, the preparation and dissemination of reports, and counterintelligence.⁴ “The successful Intelligence officer must be cool, courageous, and adroit, patient and imperturbable, discreet and trustworthy. He must understand the handling of troops and have a knowledge of the art of war.”⁵ Henderson followed up in 1907 with his published work *The Art of Reconnaissance*. A 3rd edition of *The Art of Reconnaissance* was published just prior to the outbreak of the Great War to include a new chapter on aerial reconnaissance. In his preface Henderson wrote, “A book on reconnaissance, in which the possibilities of aerial scouting are not considered, must be classed as obsolete, and yet, in this new field, experience is so limited, and progress is so rapid, that any dogmatic pronouncement on military aeronautics would, at this stage, have no permanence and little value.”⁶

In 1911, Henderson learned how to fly at the age of forty-nine while he was serving as Chief Staff Officer to Field Marshal Sir John French at the Horse Guards. He joined the ranks of ten qualified British military pilots. This accomplishment was additionally noteworthy at the time in that he earned the honor of the oldest British citizen to acquire an aviator’s license.⁸

Henderson recognized aviation’s potential, particularly as a source for collection of intelligence. His depth of understanding reconnaissance played to the roles that aviation visionaries saw during the first decade that followed the Wright Brothers’ initial successes. Airships had given the populace an idea of what could be possible in aviation. The seminal British aviation journal *FLIGHT* highlighted the potential by printing aerial photography of known landmarks on the covers. For a visionary like Henderson, such capability represented a strategic leap forward for army maneuvers because it meant the high ground was adaptable and immediately accessible. The traditional scout serviced by cavalry now had aerial technology to attain information. Aerial reconnaissance as a mission was still evolving. Its rapid evolution as a primary resource for information gathering would shape the battleground of the 20th century and beyond.

Henderson’s writings reinforced common assertions about military success predicated on good reconnaissance. His work

complemented what was already being observed by the public at large. Aviation demonstrated the limits of speed and altitude. To a military man’s way of thinking, such attributes meant increasing the timeliness of decisions in battle. Henderson’s depth in understanding aviation’s potential made him the right person to serve the British Army in this important chapter of military evolution.

The Genesis of British Military Aviation

The Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was constituted by a Royal Warrant on 13 April 1912 and came into existence a month later.⁹ It is perhaps by design rather than coincidence that Henderson, a former army intelligence officer, was selected as the first RFC commander (his official title was Director General of Military Aeronautics (DGMA)). Henderson’s reputation for intellectual depth in the intelligence arena gave the foundling

British military aviation community an acknowledged superior towards shaping the art of aerial reconnaissance. In its original organization the RFC was intended to be a Joint Service comprised of a Naval and Military Wing, the Central Flying School, the Royal Aircraft Factory, and a Reserve.¹⁰ The junior officer Sykes was selected as the first commander of the Military Wing as a gazetted major and later promoted to temporary Lieutenant-Colonel.¹¹ The Military Wing’s function in war, as conceived by Henderson, was to scout for the six divisions of the British Army.¹² By the end of 1913 the Naval Wing gave notice of its independent status by assuming the significant title of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) with Captain Murray Seuter serving as director.¹³

Henderson later remarked that

the Joint Service “was never more than a pious aspiration, and when in 1914 the Naval Wing of the RFC was transformed into the RNAS, the separation became more marked.”¹⁴

The culmination of British efforts to refine aerial operations came two months prior to the outbreak of the First World War with the Concentration Camp of the Military Wing of the Royal Flying Corps at Netheravon. Over 700 officers and men of the Headquarters Flight, Aircraft Park, Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 Squadrons, and a detachment of the Kite Section were present.¹⁵ The idea of bringing the squadrons together seems to have originated with Lt.-Col. Sykes, whose arrangements were admirable in their detailed forethought and completeness. During one aerial review as many as thirty machines were flown at one time. The mornings were devoted to trials and



▲Above: Henderson at Salisbury Plain.

experiments, the afternoons to lectures and discussion on those innumerable problems which confronted the British movement into aviation.¹⁶ Capabilities were revealed as the discussion mentioned aeroplanes armed with machine guns, rifles, and bombs carrying out operations against targets upon the ground. This was combined with insight into experimental work being conducted in wireless telegraphy. It was mentioned that messages as far as 20 miles away were being sent and received by wireless officers while flying in the aeroplanes.

¹⁷ *FLIGHT* commented that RFC morale was high. The article went so far as to presume that “One is apt to measure military strength

by numbers; but those who are acquainted with the art of war are well aware that morale is of far greater importance than numerical superiority, and organization than either of these factors.”¹⁸ The conflict in the coming weeks provided ample opportunity to test the veracity of the journal’s statement.

RFC Enters Into the War

FLIGHT’s RFC overview that summer proved providential. A month later Great Britain was at war. Henderson was given the ultimate test that August to demonstrate RFC value against a formidable German foe. Less than two weeks after Great Britain declared war against Germany and Austria, British aviation took flight to the continent to apply what Henderson had groomed during the prior two years. At midnight on 12 August, Henderson arrived at Dover with his second in command, Lt.-Col. Sykes. Henderson promptly issued orders for all machines to be ready to start for France at 0600 hours.²⁰ The first three squadrons flew over the English Channel with forty-four aeroplanes arriving at Amiens before noon.²¹ The renown Lt.-Col. Hugh “Boom” Trenchard stayed in England responsible for training both new pilots and generating additional squadrons.

COLONEL GEORGE MACDONOGH

Henderson’s most noteworthy counterpart in making British aerial reconnaissance credible during the critical first months of conflict was Colonel [later Lieutenant-General] George M. W. Macdonogh. Prior to the outbreak of the war, Macdonogh served as the head of Special Duties Section (MO 5) and recognized the need for linguists and other intelligence skills.²² Macdonogh made it clear that in his work throughout the first months of conflict “Flying men were simply indispensable and he relied on them enormously.”²³ Macdonogh was clearly appreciated by commanders and colleagues alike. A peer in the discipline of intelligence, Colonel George Squier, the American attaché to London in 1914-15, was magnanimous in his praise: “one of the most efficient staff officers I have met in England, and has a serene temperament, which exactly fits him for his present duties of collecting information, digesting it and deducing conclusions as to the situation of the enemy.”²⁴ Macdonogh’s boss during this decisive time, Field-Marshal Sir John French, British Expeditionary Force (BEF) commander, gave the highest praise in his post-war reminiscence: “I cannot

speaking too highly of the skill and ability displayed by this distinguished officer throughout the whole time during which we served together. His service was invaluable; his ingenuity and resource in obtaining and collecting information, his indefatigable brain, and unfailing versatility and insight with which he sifted every statement and circumstance were beyond all praise.”²⁵

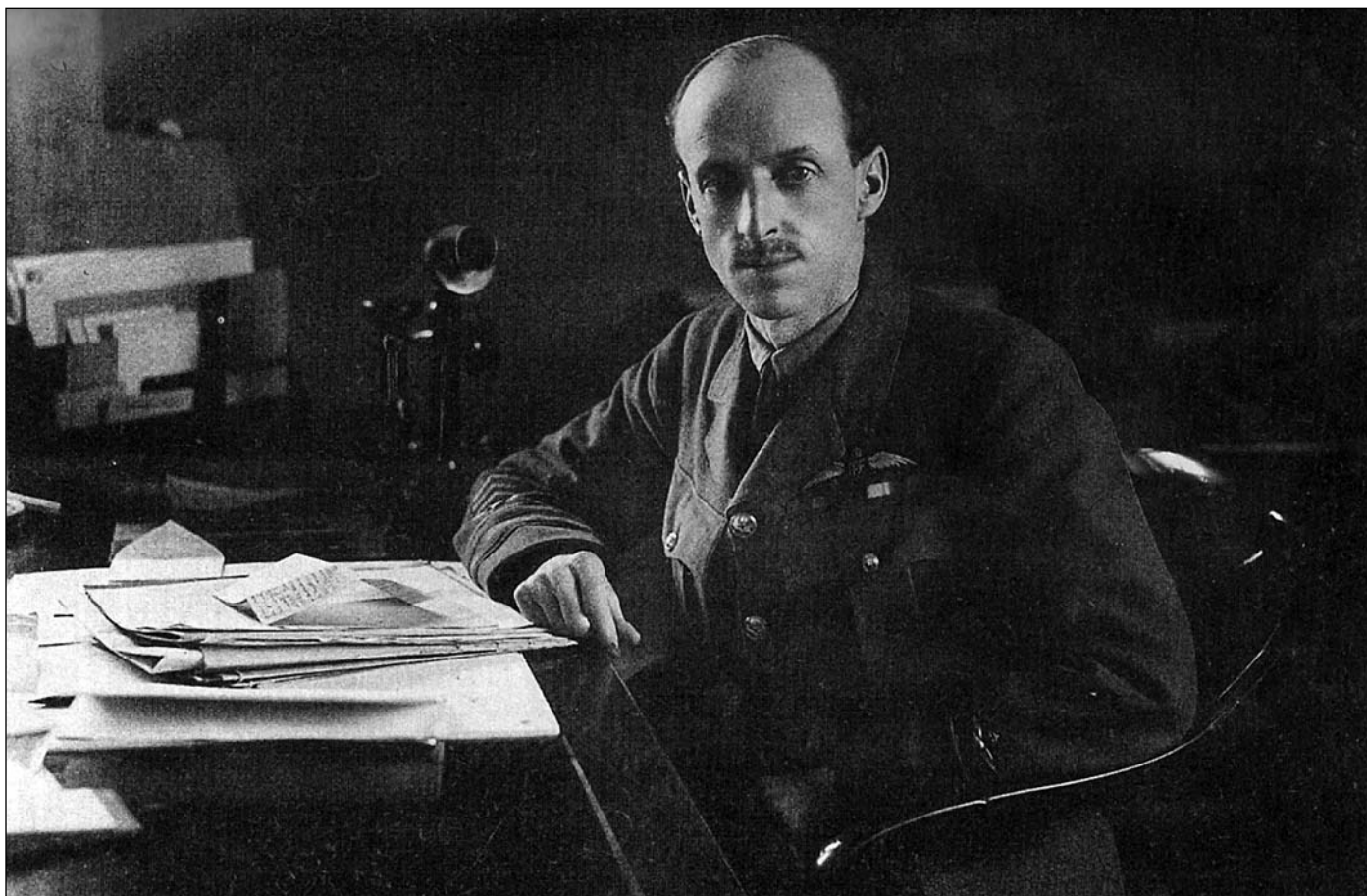
LIEUTENANT-COLONEL FREDERICK SYKES

Henderson’s key subordinate responsible for British military aviation’s ascendancy at the early stage of

development was an enigma. Frederick H. Sykes was a self-made man—intelligent, innovative and industrious. He was fifteen years younger than Henderson, but his intense drive to succeed made him known fixture throughout the British Army. His initial exposure to the military was serving in South Africa during the Boer War as a scout. The experience included being captured and held as a prisoner of war. He was subsequently released and received a serious chest wound while on cavalry patrol. In 1901 Sykes received a commission in the Regular Army with the 15th Hussars. During a subsequent assignment to India, he became exposed to the world of aeronautics by taking a balloon orientation course while on leave in Britain.²⁶ His indomitable will was clearly demonstrated while assigned to the War Office Directorate. Besides acquiring his aviator’s



▲Above: Colonel George MacDonogh



▲Above: Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Sykes as Chief of Air Staff.

certificate in 1911, Sykes became point man for observing flying operations underway in Europe. His "Notes on Aviation in France" alerted British military seniors to the dismal state of their aviation and strengthened Sykes' reputation as one of the most knowledgeable officers in the ranks. When the RFC was established under Brigadier-General Henderson, Major Sykes assumed command of the Military Wing.²⁷ Despite his incredible legacy in helping formulate British military aviation, history does not paint a warm picture of Sykes. Major-General Sir Hugh "Boom" Trenchard throughout his wartime career was constantly at odds with him, contributing to Henderson's burden of keeping the RFC relevant to the incessant demands of the BEF GHQ as well as the War Ministry in London. Henderson, a person of equanimity, tolerance and rare detachment, was forced to apply discretion when learning of their squabbles.²⁸ Despite this, Sykes' administrative competence was unquestioned and played a significant role in making the RFC function effectively during the first months of operation in France.

After three days in Amiens, the RFC assembled both headquarters and four squadrons with 105 officers, 755 other ranks, and 63 aeroplanes at the aerodrome of Maubeuge on the French-Belgian border. RFC transport was requisitioned from available vehicles, to include two Maple's furniture vans and a lorry designed for holding refuse. One van requisitioned had the label "The World's Best Appetizer" prominently displayed.²⁹ Meanwhile an RFC aircraft park was also established at

Amiens.³⁰ Air Vice Marshal Brooke-Popham later recalled in 1922: "The R.F.C. seems to have taken about a fortnight after landing in France, to get into its stride. Remember the attitude of mind in which we went out in August 1914. Most people looked forward to it as a sort of glorified picnic the most important question being whether we should be back before the hunting season was all over. We arrived in France the whole force feted and treated as heroes."³¹

Macdonogh recalled after the war, "I should have liked to have told you something of the work of the R. F. C. in the early days of the war. They were then a very small and very excellent band. Many of them, including their very brilliant leader, David Henderson, we shall never see again, but they have left an imperishable name behind them."³³ Macdonogh's sincere comments paid high complement to the challenges that Henderson and the RFC faced those first weeks of conflict. First, Henderson worked for Field-Marshal Sir John French, a career cavalryman who was skeptical of aerial reconnaissance's ability to make a major difference in his campaign. In his memoirs Sir John French recalled "this was our first practical experience in the use of aircraft for reconnaissance purposes." French realized he had limited quantities of aeroplanes. He also understood that the accuracy and excellence of the information obtained by the RFC in the opening stages of the campaign by necessarily rather inexperienced observers was a concern.³⁴ French made it clear that cavalry was not replaced by aerial reconnaissance. By working together, he reasoned, the two made the greatest contribution to the campaign. The use of aerial reconnaissance helped "save horse-flesh" to

concentrate on actual combat and fighting.³⁵ Contemporary thinking on Henderson's RFC made the observation that "the value of that information at the time was appreciated rather more by our French Allies than by the Higher Command of the British Expeditionary Forces."³⁶

Another serious challenge was the ability to identify friend from foe, a concern throughout the first months of conflict. While the RFC commenced operations in France the BEF marched north through Maubeuge enroute to Mons, Belgium. One of the original members of the Military Wing, Captain Joubert de la Ferté remembered "We were rather sorry they had come because up till that moment we had only been fired on by the French whenever we flew. Now we were fired on by French and English."³⁷ Aeroplane recognition posed a significant challenge for the early aviator. Infantry on both sides were not accustomed to aeroplanes and their role. The priority for establishing and assigning distinguishing marks of nationality became a necessity to safely operate at lower altitudes. "Union Jacks have been put on the under surfaces of the lower planes. They are not large enough and larger ones are necessary. The French have a blue spot, surrounded at an interval, by a red ring. The Germans have a black cross on some of their machines."³⁸ Confusion over identity eventually led to the British adopting the French-style roundel with a blue outer circle and red spot.

The first RFC operating location was at Maubeuge, 15 kilometers south of Mons. Henderson and Sykes arrived at Maubeuge on 17 August to an office within a little tin shed at the Aerodrome with an enormous French map on one wall. Lieutenant Maurice Baring, Intelligence Corps attached to Henderson's staff, recalled the memorable meals served at the officer's mess "...tepid, bully beef and biscuits, whisky and sparklets. It was incredibly nasty."³⁹

Aerial reconnaissance operations got underway on 19 August with the first RFC aerial reconnaissance flown by Captain Philip Joubert de la Ferté, No. 3 Squadron, and Lieutenant Gibb Mapplebeck from No. 4 Squadron. Joubert de la Ferté flew a Blériot XI-2 (without observer) while Mapplebeck took off in a BE 2a from Maubeuge at 0930 hours. Mapplebeck flew to the north while Joubert de la Ferté was ordered to inspect the Belgian country west of Brussels and report on any evidence of enemy troops. Shortly after take off, the pilots struggled with cloudy weather and a general unfamiliarity with the region, resulting in their getting lost. Both considered it "rather bad form to come down and ask people the way," but discretion was soon applied.⁴¹ The result of both reconnaissance missions was negative. Joubert de la Ferté and Mapplebeck reported with assurance on where the Germans were not, but had nothing

to say about where they were.⁴² The time had come for aerial observers to be included on reconnaissance sorties.⁴³

On 20 August British cavalry were on the move in Belgium. They pushed forward as far as Binche (16 kilometers east of Mons) without encountering the enemy. At the same time,

There is no part of military duty, save the art of chief command, which demands a higher qualification than the conduct of independent reconnaissance.³²

Reconnaissance in an efficient army in the field should be unceasing...⁴⁰

...the results are usually better when scouts work in pairs; companionship gives confidence, and observation is cool and deliberate.⁴⁴

RFC aerial reconnaissance was ordered to find the German army, pinpoint its position, and estimate its strength. The RFC discovered elements of the German army heading

through Louvain (approximately 25 kilometers southeast of Brussels). Aerial observation estimates of strength proved too difficult since German army columns went beyond the visual horizon. That day the German army moved into Brussels. The main echelon was now heading towards Northern France.⁴⁵

VINDICATION

Colonel Macdonogh set the stage for aerial reconnaissance reporting with Henderson. As the Germans entered Brussels, he made it clear that "it was most important that we should have information of their [Von Kluck's army] subsequent

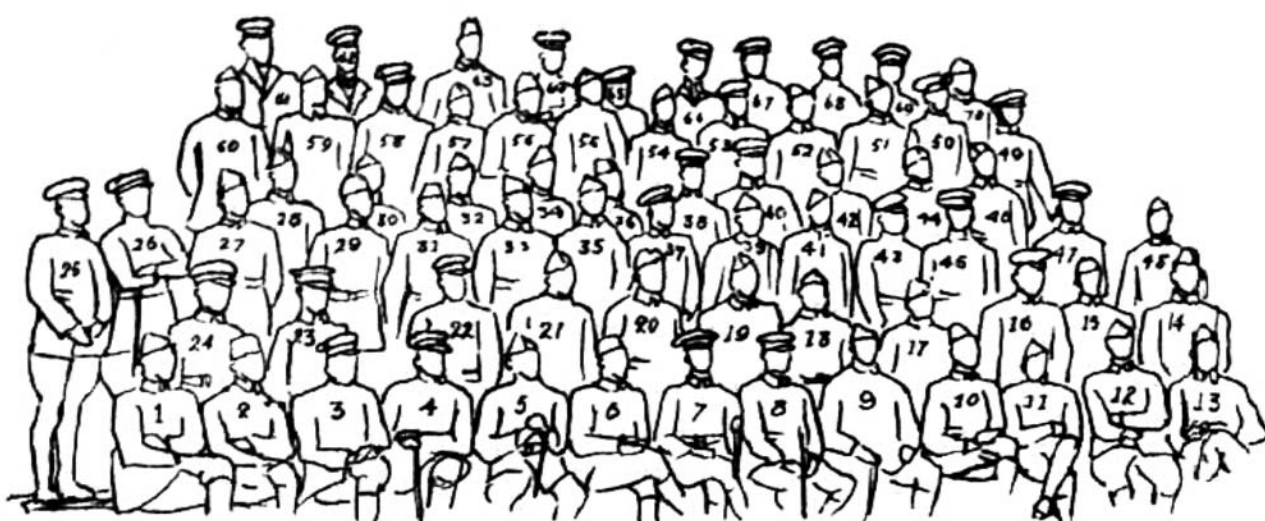
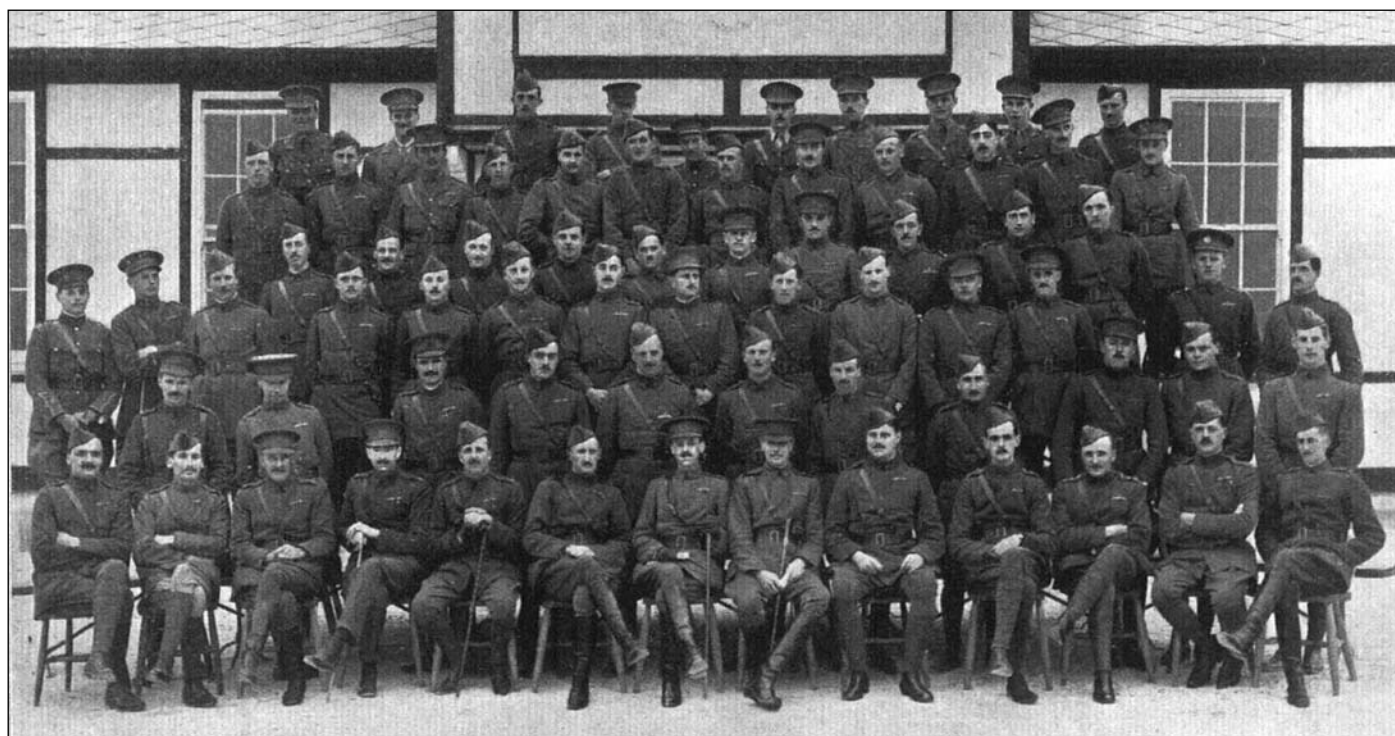
movements.⁴⁷ General von Kluck's 1st Army departed Brussels and headed west. His intentions at this point were unknown to the Allies.

That morning RFC early morning reconnaissance sorties were delayed due to a heavy ground mist. Later that afternoon the weather became rainy and misty. Territory immediately north of the British line at Mons was checked and no sighting of German reconnaissance or advance units noted. Then Lieutenant Corballis, flew north from Maubeuge to Soignes [ten miles northeast of Mons] then proceeded to Nivelles, 10 miles west of Brussels. South of Nivelles at Pont-a-Celles on the Charleroi canal, Corballis reported three villages burning. The devastation aided observer assessment of where the German forces were. It was a mile south of Nivelles that the most significant discovery of the day was accomplished. Corballis spotted a large body of cavalry partially hidden in woods one mile south of the town as well as a body of infantry moving south towards Charleroi.⁴⁸ This intelligence was confirmed from a British intelligence officer driving in the area. He was able to ascertain

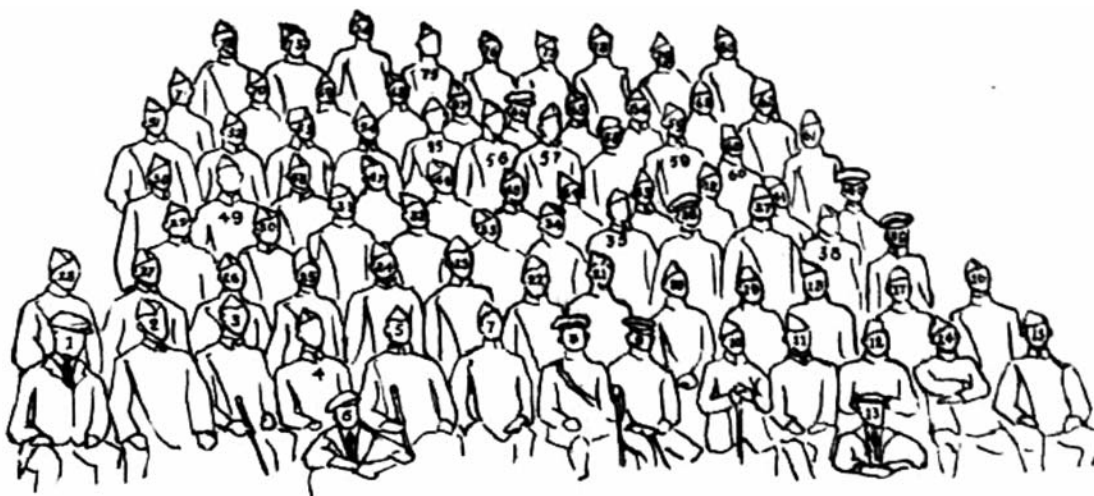
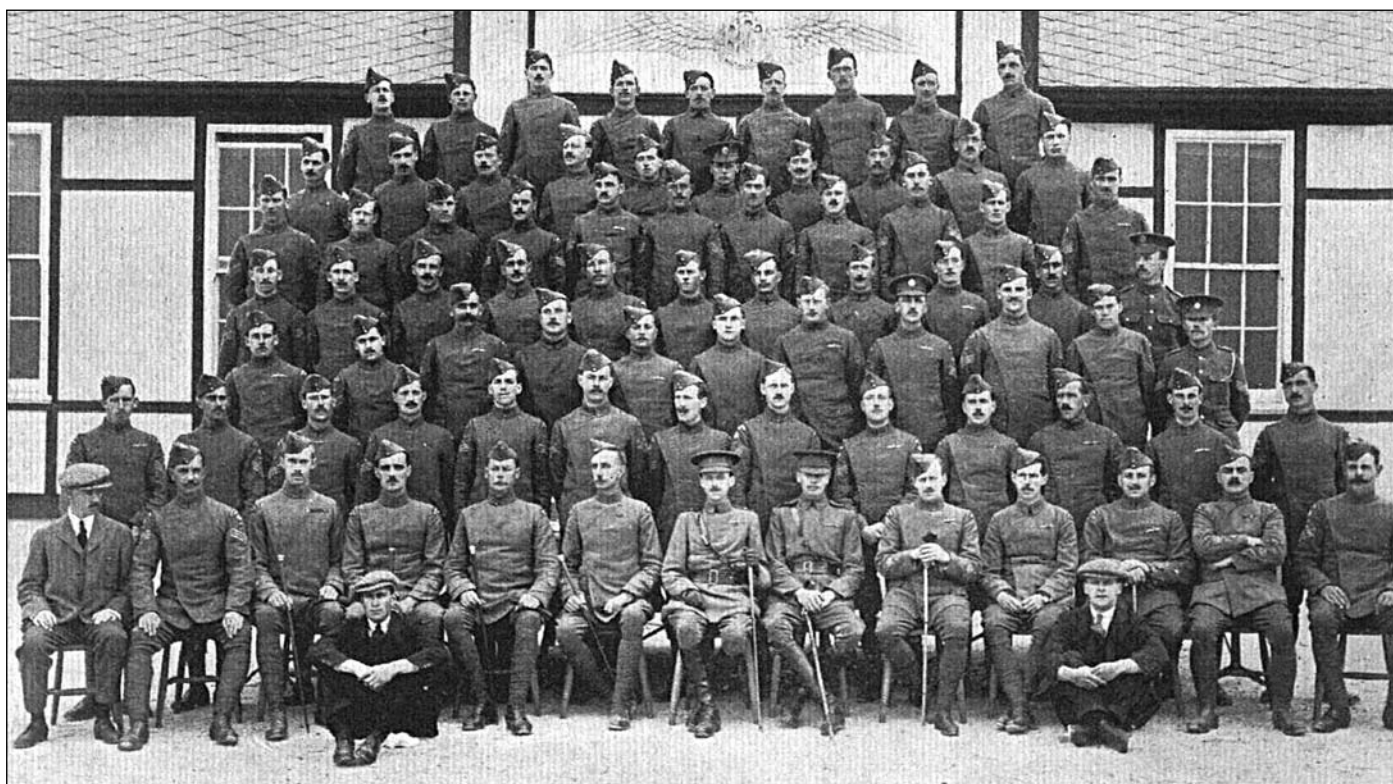
the two cavalry divisions were in the area, one being the 9th Cavalry Division. The officer managed to escape from the German force and arrived later that night with

critical confirmation of Corballis' report.⁴⁹ Henderson and Sykes were now a constant presence at GHQ.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most significant day in RFC aerial reconnaissance history was 22 August. British forces now engaged the Germans when cavalry clashed against cavalry near Soignies.⁵² Macdonogh contacted Henderson that it was most important that GHQ should have any information of German movements out



CONCENTRATION CAMP AT NETHERAVON.—Officers of the Royal Flying Corps: (1) Capt. Beatty, (2) Capt. Dawes, (3) Maj. Brabazon, (4) Maj. Musgrave, (5) Maj. Raleigh, (6) Maj. Higgins, (7) Col. Sykes (Commanding Officer), (8) Lt. B. H. Barrington Kennett (Adjutant), (9) Capt. Conner, (10) Capt. Cholmondeley, (11) Capt. Herbert, (12) Capt. Charlton (13) Capt. Carmichael, (14) 2nd Lt. Fuller, (15) Lt. Joubert de la Ferte, (16) Lt. Mills, (17) Lt. Hynes, (18) Capt. Waldron, (19) Capt. Todd, (20) Capt. Beor (Camp Commdt.), (21) Capt. Stopford, (22) Capt. Grev, (23) Capt. Shephard, (24) Capt. Holt, (25) Lt. Smith, (26) Lt. Christie, (27) 2nd Lt. Stodart, (28) Lt. Penn-Gaskell, (29) Lt. Redwell, (30) Lt. Dawes, (31) Lt. James, (32) Lt. Martyn, (33) Lt. Spence, (34) Lt. Vaughan, (35) Lt. Mansfield, (36) Lt. Roche, (37) 2nd Lt. Humphreys, (38) Lt. Read, (39) Lt. Gould, (40) Lt. Adams, (41) Lt. Mitchell, (42) Lt. Barton, (43) Lt. Cogan, (44) Lt. Corballis, (45) Lt. Small, (46) Lt. Mapplebeck, (47) Lt. Allen, (48) Hon. Lt. Pryce (Qr.-Mr.), (49) Lt. S. G. Small, (50) Lt. Morgan, (51) Lt. Lewis, (52) 2nd Lt. O'Brien Hubbard, (53) Lt. Playfair, (54) Lt. Porter, (55) 2nd Lt. Wadham, (56) Lt. Noel, (57) Lt. Glanville, (58) Lt. MacNeece, (59) Lt. Freeman, (60) Lt. Harvey Kelly, (61) attached, (62) Mr. Carpenter, (63) Lt. Shekelton, (64) Lt. Atkinson, (65) 2nd Lt. Hartree, (66) attached, (67) Lt. Hosking, (68) Lt. Waterfall, (69) Lt. Lywood, (70) Lt. Hordern.



CONCENTRATION CAMP AT NETHERAVON.—Warrant and N.C.O.s. of the Royal Flying Corps: (1) Lg. Art. McKenna, (2) F. Sgt. Jillings, (3) Sgt.-Maj. Wilford, (4) Sgt.-Maj. Unwin, (5) Sgt.-Maj. Parker, (6) Lg. Art. Powell, (7) Sgt.-Maj. Ramsey, (8) Col. Sykes (Commanding Officer), (9) Lt. Barrington Kennett (Adjutant), (10) Sgt.-Maj. Fletcher, (11) Sgt.-Maj. Thomas, (12) Sgt.-Maj. Measures, (13) Lg. Art. Beeby, (14) Sgt.-Maj. Starling, (15) F. Sgt. Nichols, (16) F. Sgt. Long, (17) Sgt. Mullen, (18) Sgt. Mitchell, (19) Sgt. Saywood, (20) F. Sgt. Bruce, (21) F. Sgt. Brockbank, (22) F. Sgt. Hilliar, (23) Sgt. Bullen, (24) Sgt. Hudson, (25) Sgt. Baxter, (26) Sgt. Bullock, (27) F. Sgt. Carter, (28) F. Sgt. Ridd, (29) Sgt. McCudden, (30) Sgt. Traill, (31) Sgt. Street, (32) Sgt. Methery, (33) Sgt. Kemper, (34) Sgt. Keszler, (35) Sgt. Waddington, (36) Sgt. Bateman, (37) Sgt. Ellard, (38) Sgt. Valsey, (39) Sgt. Miles (A.S.C.), (40) S. Sgt. Smith (R.E.), (41) Sgt. Edwards, (42) Sgt. Porter, (43) Sgt. Page, (44) Sgt. Baughan, (45) Sgt. Little, (46) Sgt. Smith, (47) Sgt. Cullen, (48) Sgt. Felstead, (49) Sgt. Cox, (50) Sgt. Mottram, (51) Sgt. Fulton, (52) Sgt. Bullock, (53) Sgt. Tindale, (54) Sgt. Barnes, (55) Sgt. Farrer, (56) Sgt. Aspinall, (57) Sgt. Laws, (58) Sgt. Petch, (59) Sgt. King, (60) Sgt. Hargreaves, (61) Sgt. Patterson, (62) Sgt. Archbold, (63) Sgt. Goodchild, (64) Sgt. Slade, (65) Sgt. McCarthy, (66) Sgt. Sedger, (67) Sgt. O'Reilly, (68) Sgt. McAvoy, (69) Sgt. Taylor, (70) Sgt. Spencer, (71) Sgt. Hughes, (72) Sgt. Millett, (73) Sgt. Grow, (74) Sgt. Angell, (75) Sgt. James, (76) Sgt. Breeding, (77) Sgt. Hoffman, (78) Sgt. Hayward, (79) Sgt. Campbell, (80) Sgt. Jones.

of the Brussels area.⁵³ The RFC launched twelve reconnaissance sorties from Maubeuge, France (on the French-Belgium border, ten miles south of Mons), reporting on extensive German maneuvers and the presence of large masses of troops.⁵⁴ Macdonogh recalled the special relationship that was established with RFC aircrews. "In those early days, as they were so few in number, David Henderson used, whenever possible, to send the pilot or observer to see me after any important reconnaissance."⁵⁵ The fog of war was starting to dissipate.⁵⁶

The first sortie flown by Captain G.S. Shephard with Lieutenant I.M. Bonham-Carter as observer returned by 1100 hours. They landed at Beaumont (about twelve miles east of Maubeuge) and refueled from French forces in the area. While there, they learned that *Général* Sordet, on his march westwards to the left flank of the Allied armies, had on the encountered German infantry the day before north of the Sambre canal, and had been compelled to fall back. This accounted for Sordet's southward retreat to Binche.⁵⁷

At 1000 hours, Second Lieutenant V.H.N. Wadham as pilot and his observer Captain L.E.O. Charlton took off and flew towards Brussels and Grammont.

They subsequently landed at Moerbeke (two miles south-east of Grammont) to make inquiries with anyone in the area if Germans had been seen. Here they received information which hastened their departure.

They learned from the mayor of Moerbeke that 5,000 Germans were nearby in Grammont, cavalry and cyclists were in Lessines, and German cavalry were expected from Enghien to arrive in Ath that evening. Wadham and Charlton resumed the sortie and encountered a German infantry brigade moving southwest between Ath and Enghien. Their sortie concluded at 1310 hours.⁵⁸

At 1150 hours, a third sortie under the control of Lieutenant M. W. Noel with Sergeant-Major D.S. Jillings of No. 2 Squadron landed back at Maubeuge. Heavy fire from German infantry was encountered throughout their flight. Jillings was wounded in the leg by a rifle bullet, giving him the distinction of being the first British soldier to be wounded in an aeroplane in any war.⁵⁹

The legacy of 22 August 1914 was not without tragedy. Two British aviators, Lieutenant V. Waterfall and Lieutenant G.C.G. Bailey, were shot down and killed by German ground fire while flying their Avro at a dangerous altitude close to the German forces. This aviation casualty gave the Germans their first hint that they were facing the BEF on their front.⁶⁰

Ironically, the most important aerial reconnaissance sortie was

But it must be expected that the principal dispositions and movements will be disclosed, and that the fog which formerly obscured the initial strategic design will be cleared away.⁴⁶

The acquisition of accurate information is one of the most difficult tasks of a commander in the field. The numbers, the dispositions, the movements of the enemy are veiled in an obscurity which has been aptly named the fog of war.⁵¹

Military value is dependent on the situation, and perhaps on the magnitude of the operations...⁶⁵

not recorded in the RFC war diaries.⁶¹ The value of the report was recognized at once when it came in. Armed with this information, both Henderson and Sykes went to report it in person to GHQ.⁶²

Macdonogh recalled later in 1922, "He [Henderson] consequently sent out a reconnaissance on the 22nd, whether one or machines I do not remember, but he certainly let me know that

day that a long column, correctly estimated at one corps, had been seen moving along the Brussels-Ninove road, which on reaching Ninove had bent South-Westwards towards Grammont. Put-

ting two and two together we came to the conclusion that this was the II Corps and the report showed very clearly that our position on the Mons Canal was likely to be outflanked."⁶³ Lieutenant E.L. Spears, the British liaison officer at *V^{ème} Armée* headquarters in his *Liaison 1914* account, echoed the drama of the moment with "It was bound to outflank us. Now we knew. No possible doubt could subsist. The German manoeuvre stood fully revealed."⁶⁴

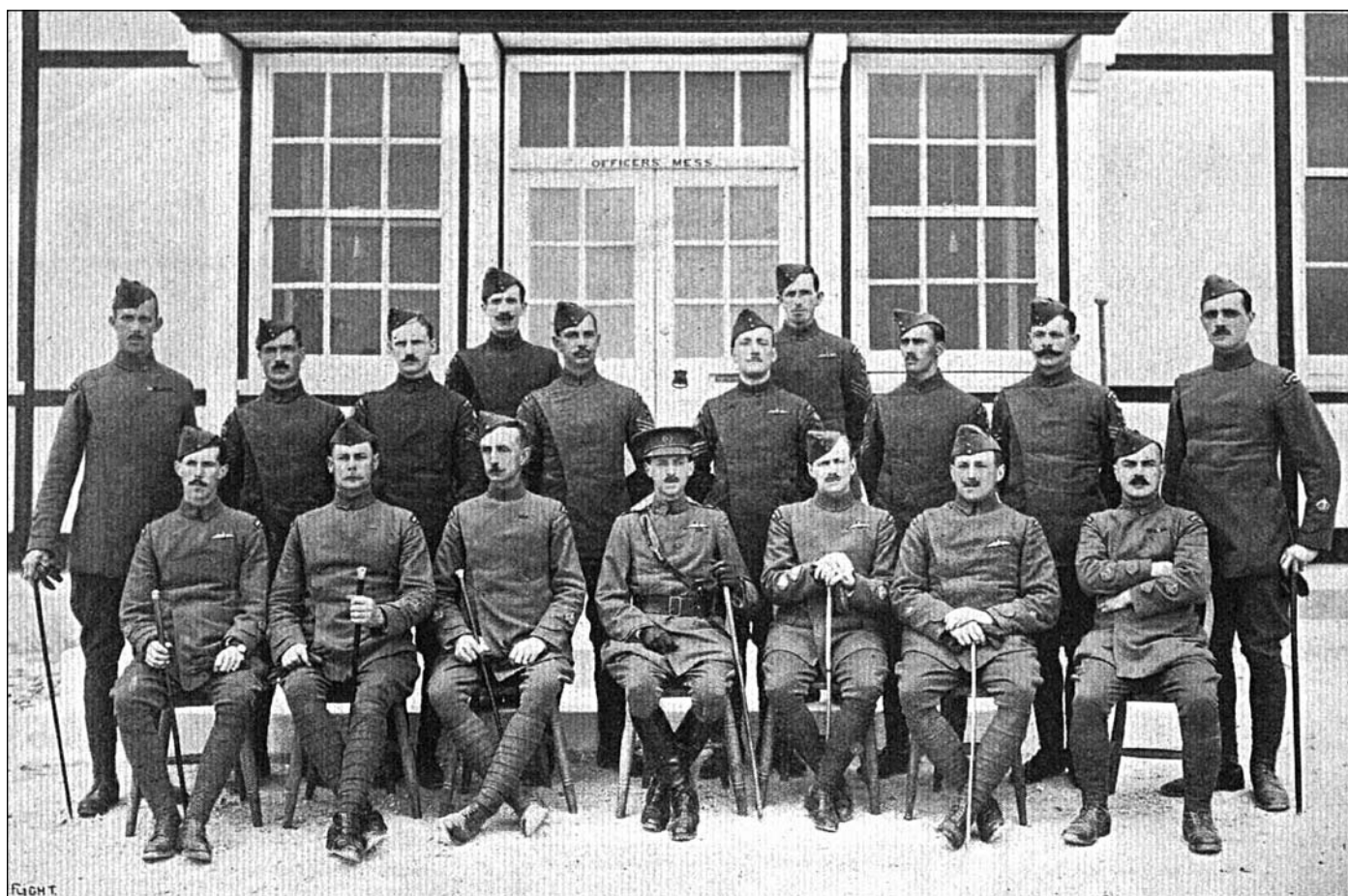
Macdonogh was convinced that the aerial reconnaissance was accurate. He received further confirmation from the French as

well as from Belgian agents.⁶⁶

Along with Henderson's report of General von Kluck's attempted envelopment was the startling revelation that the BEF was on the verge of entering into the trap by moving north to Soignies at the request of *Général* Joffre. *Gé-*

néral Lanrezac, the French *V^{ème} Armée* commander, had made the decision that day not to attack creating a critical gap on the BEF flank. The French center had been driven back.⁶⁷ Macdonogh learned this through discussions at GHQ. The RFC report from Henderson made it clear that should the BEF proceed north to Soignies, the British flank was seriously threatened along with vital communications possibly cut by the German corps coming south from Grammont. Macdonogh continued to remind BEF seniors of Henderson's aerial reconnaissance alert.⁶⁸ Field-Marshal French held a late conference at Le Cateau to review the situation. At the close of the conference Sir John stated that owing to the retreat of the French *V^{ème} Armée*, the British offensive would not take place. A request from *Général* Lanrezac arrived at 2300 hours asking for offensive action against the German right flank, which was pressing him back from the Sambre. This could not be undertaken, but Field-Marshal French promised to remain in his position for twenty-four hours.⁶⁹

The sum total of RFC observations acquired on the 22nd of August covered several brigades (probably amounting to a corps in all) of German infantry filling the roads south of Grammont, a cavalry division was at now postured at Soignies, and front line



CONCENTRATION CAMP AT NETHERAVON.—Warrant Officers and Flight Sergeants; (1) Sgt.-Maj. Wilford, (2) F. Sgt. Lacy, (3) F. Sgt. Brockbank, (4) F. Sgt. Hilliar, (5) F. Sgt. Jillings, (6) F. Sgt. Bruce, (7) F. Sgt. Ridd, (8) F. Sgt. Carter, (9) F. Sgt. Nicholls, (10) Sgt.-Maj. Unwin, (11) Sgt.-Maj. Thomas, (12) Sgt.-Maj. Parker, (13) Sgt.-Maj. Ramsey, (14) Col. Sykes (Commanding Officer), (15) Sgt.-Maj. Fletcher, (16) Sgt.-Maj. Measures, (17) Sgt.-Maj. Starling.

now faced southwest from Lessines to Soignies. The German advance created a flanking maneuver against the BEF positions at Mons.⁷¹ Prior to the aerial reconnaissance report BEF GHQ decided the German corps were following each other in a long procession, turning inwards one after the other as they reached the Sambre; a critically flawed impression. Instead the massive German force advanced like “the ribs of a fan” with the unmistakable objective of enveloping the Allied line. The RFC’s aerial reconnaissance that came back with this information was probably the most fruitful of the whole war.⁷² The information gleaned enabled the British forces to keep ahead of the German maneuver and avoid a catastrophic situation.⁷³

Conclusion

RFC aerial reconnaissance on 22 August 1914 of the long German column along the Brussels-Ninhove road heading towards Grammont was the start of an illustrious legacy for British military aviation in the Great War. Sir John French recalled in his post-war memoirs on the battle of Mons that despite all the information coming in from sources such as aerial reconnaissance, “nothing came to hand which led us to foresee the crushing superiority of strength which actually confronted us on Sunday, 23 August.”⁷⁵ The Germans were gambling on surprise, on swiftness of movement, on a speedy victory and they were prepared to wager every man they had. The BEF was outnumbered by two to one.⁷⁶ Decisions were quickly made. The British now commenced the famous “retreat” from Mons and headed south.⁷⁷ On the 24th the BEF conducted their first full day of retreat. On Monday, 24 August, at 0900 hrs Henderson’s staff received orders to leave Maubeuge and head to Le Cateau where the British GHQ was located. That night the RFC staff and dozens of pilots slept fully dressed in a barn on top of and underneath a pile of straw. Despite the disruption, everybody was quite cheerful, especially the pilots.⁷⁸

Maubeuge operations ceased and for the next 15 days Henderson’s RFC relocated to ten different locations from Le Cateau to Touquin near Paris. The RFC displayed a remarkable ability to function “on the run” going from one operating location to the next heading closer to Paris and ultimately staging out of a landing field about 20 miles southwest of the city during the historic battle of the First Marne. In the days that followed the First Marne, the RFC returned north and finally settled in at St. Omer where they operated for most of

the war.

Wartime intelligence operations evolved along with aviation operations thanks to the aerial reconnaissance legacy of the opening salvos and subsequent battle of the First Marne. Field-Marshal French now had Col Macdonogh brief him twice daily at 0830 hours every morning and at an appointed time in the afternoon. Joining Macdonogh in the daily discussions were Sir John French’s chief of staff

and Henderson, RFC Commander. In Henderson’s absence, Sykes substituted and provided aerial reconnaissance updates.⁷⁹

British aerial reconnaissance proved invaluable in the opening salvos of the Great War. Success can be attributed to Sir David Henderson’s depth of knowledge, vision, and ability to lead under dire circumstances. His longtime friend and confidant, Maurice Baring recalled, “It is a great mercy we had a Flying Corps at all. And the nation owes an eternal debt of gratitude to General Henderson and to those who fought the battle for the adoption of the aeroplane as a military weapon before the

war, and to all those who organized the original Squadrons of the R.F.C. and the R.N.A.S.”⁸⁰ Buchan’s obituary goes even further in reinforcing a Henderson legacy worthy of admiration and reflection, “To David Hen-

derson this service owes more than to any single man, and his name must for ever be linked with it. For one thing, he was the pioneer, the man with insight and vision; for another, he was a most competent administrator, as his record bears witness—75 machines in 1914, 25,000 in 1917.”⁸¹ Such sentiment was shared by many who knew him. Lord Trenchard later in life called him the true Father of the Air Force.⁸²

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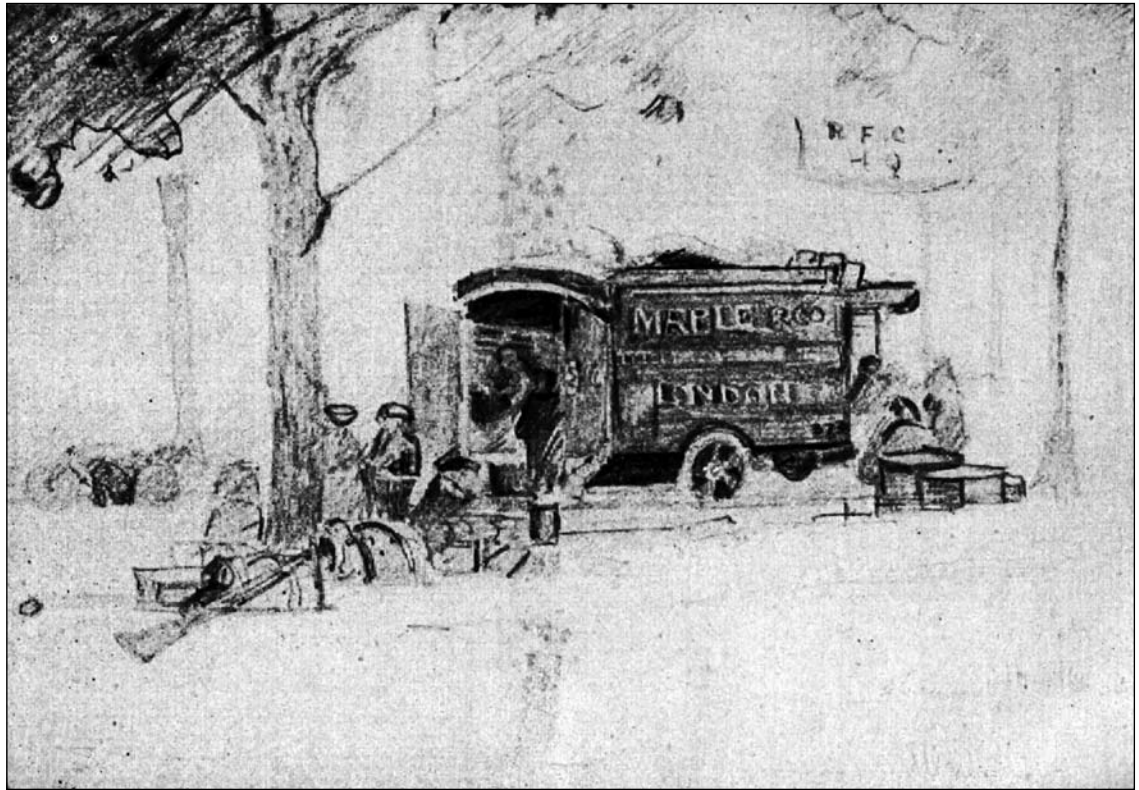
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Only by swift movement, calculated accurately on considerations of space and time, and worked out for the enemy as well as for his own force, can a commander hope to surprise or even to anticipate an efficient adversary in the strategy of the future.⁷⁰

For the final value of reconnaissance depends very much on the ability of junior officers to discern the facts or deductions which will be of use to their superiors.⁷⁴

The principal value of aerial reconnaissance lies in the distance which can be covered; in the speed with which the objective can be reached, and the information brought back; in the fact that there are no obstacles to be met with except hostile aircraft; and in the consideration that the enemy’s dispositions in depth as well as in front can be observed.⁸³

► **Right:** RFC Support after Mons.



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